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PS4 AND XBOX ONE
THE BIGGEST NEW GAMES REVIEWED
WORLD OF WARCRAFT
LEGION
"I ALWAYS WARN PEOPLE WE'RE JUST NO BULLS**T"
Cliff Bleszinski reveals his plan to reinvent shooters
HOW BLIZZARD'S LATEST WILL SECURE ITS MMO THRONE
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Why now is the time to get into League Of Legends
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FINAL FANTASY XV ■ MIRROR'S EDGE: CATALYST ■ UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
MASS EFFECT: ANDROMEDA ■ YO-KAI WATCH ■ TRACKMANIA TURBO ■ ADR1FT
STAR FOX ZERO ■ HYPER LIGHT DRIFTER ■ EVE: VALKYRIE ■ LUCKY'S TALE

Blizzard is having one of the biggest years in its history thanks to the launch of a massive new IP in the form of *Overwatch* and its plans to revitalised *World Of Warcraft* with another gigantic expansion. As such, it's no great surprise that the developer should grace our cover for a second time already in 2016.

The launch of any new expansion to *WoW* is noteworthy, not least because Blizzard doesn't treat them in the way other developers do, as little treats for fans or minor extensions of gameplay. A Blizzard expansion is essentially a brand new game, often featuring new mechanics, brand new gameplay and hours of additional content that builds on the amazing world it created over a decade ago.

Legion stands out, however, as it has an additional role to play this year. While all the expansions in this universe have sought to open themselves up to new players, this one needs to capture the imaginations of people eager to jump into the fray after experiencing *Warcraft: The Beginning*, the franchise's cinematic debut. It's a big moment in the life of this title. Having destroyed all competition in the MMO world, can it live up to the fantasy genre expectations of the silver screen crowds?

Whatever the answer to that ends up being, this is still Blizzard's year and the content it's putting out is some of the best in years.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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Raymond


A fresh food supply ripe for the taking? Looks like the marauders are eating good tonight!
Robert

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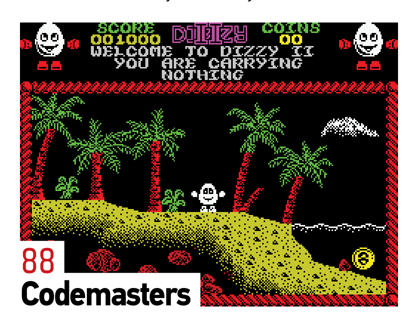


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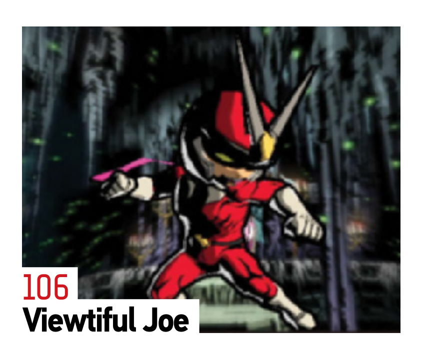
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WORLD OF WARCRAFT
LEGION
Find out why now is the time to step back into Azeroth, as the newest expansion opens up the MMO just in time for its blockbuster movie debut

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MAGIC MOMENTS

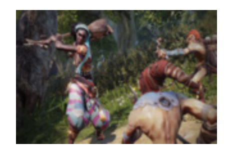
Why Lionhead's Fable Legends didn't deserve to die

→ As we took our last steps into Albion, **games™** muses on the death of a potentially great game



We're all partly to blame for the unceremonious end to the *Fable* franchise. Microsoft is certainly to blame for the way in which it chose to promote *Fable Legends* in the first place, a mistake dating back to 2013; Lionhead is to blame for the way it forcibly kept Xbox One owners out of the loop, shackling beta players with a non-disclosure agreement to restrict conversation. Uninformed members of the press then covered the game poorly, mislabelling it as a MOBA and writing off Lionhead's new 'Games as a Service' studio mantra before it was given a chance to succeed; the franchise fans that screamed oh-so loudly into the void certainly didn't help, aggressively lashing out at the first hint of potential change. We've all had a hand in the death of Lionhead Studios and *Fable Legends*, and it should never have been allowed to get this far.

Below Microsoft had *Fable Legends* in closed beta from last October with the promise of an open beta this spring. Sadly that won't be happening any more.

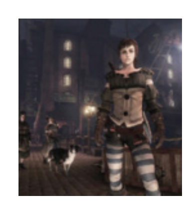


It may not have been the traditional *Fable* sequel that we all fervently claimed we wanted, but *Legends* actually showed great potential. It straddled the line between pandering and progression; faithful to the franchise in spirit and yet it had its sights set on ensuring we never need spend £50 on an adventure in Albion again. In a morbidly ironic sense, at least it succeeded in that respect. *Fable Legends* was supposed to be the game that always delivered, the free-to-play adventure that never ended. All we needed to do was give it a chance.

There was something joyful about stepping into the world of Albion again in *Fable Legends*, especially one brought to life with the Unreal Engine 4. Lionhead did a fantastic job of bringing the whimsical aura of its world to a new generation; plush foliage, towering structures and beautiful vistas demanded attention with every turn of the camera. It was bright and colourful – it felt magical in a way that only *Fable* could be.

DATA STREAM → TITANFALL TEAM RESPAWN HAS EXPANDED BY 30 PER CENT TO MAKE A SEQUEL

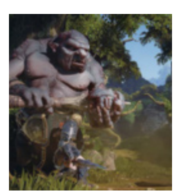
TIMELINE OF DESTRUCTION



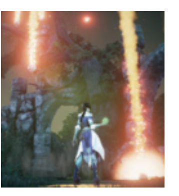
MAR 2012
Following the departure of Peter Molyneux, Lionhead cancels *Fable 4* – which was in pre-production – and begins development on *Legends*



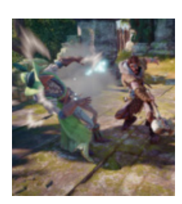
AUG 2013
Fable Legends is revealed with a cinematic trailer at Gamescom 2013, promising intuitive SmartGlass integration



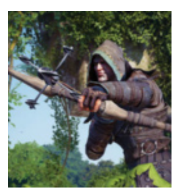
JUN 2014
A live gameplay demo at E3 plants the seeds of discontent amongst fans. A limited, closed beta begins shortly after E3



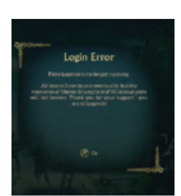
JAN 2015
Microsoft confirms that SmartGlass integration has been cancelled to make the game playable across Xbox One and Windows 10



FEB 2015
Lionhead announces that *Legends* will be F2P, supported by DLC seasons. Beta access is still closed, despite highly-polished missions



JUN 2015
Game Preview is unveiled, a service to let in-development games be playable by the public. *Fable Legends* is nowhere to be seen



APR 2016
The game is delayed and beta access restricted with an NDA. The beta servers officially close 13 April, in spite of the game being playable

And yet, it's this mix of the visual design of Albion and the new gameplay that was never quite understood. *Fable Legends* pulled four heroes together and sent them out to slay monsters and tackle objectives, as you'd expect to in a *Fable* game, only it took a far more linear and clinical approach to adventuring. In many respects it was like *Dungeon Keeper*, if the action had been dragged out of its dirty underground depths and out into one the most beautiful and lush forest areas you'd ever seen. You'd move between well-designed arenas, fighting waves of enemies while working in a team of real or AI-controlled heroes – it was simple but accessible.

It was also fun. It's fair to say that Lionhead could have worked to make quests more interactive, introduced light puzzle elements or multi-person quest modifiers to really help sell the concept. That could have come in the future, though; the plan was always to bring new content to the game through 'Seasons', which would bring new storylines and characters into the fray. If any aspect of *Fable Legends*' design could really be criticised, it would be on the depth of the melee combat – it always felt incredibly reliant on button-mashing and spam-attacks. It lacked depth, but, then again, it is worth remembering that *Fable* was never really known for having a deep combat system.



Above Every opportunity that we had to experience *Fable Legends* we left impressed with the style, but wondering why it wasn't a new IP.

> "What's worse is that in 2015 Microsoft introduced the perfect platform to showcase Legends"

Still, little niggling concerns aside, *Fable Legends* felt almost ready to go. It was in closed beta, and, honestly – unless there was a server-side problem that we don't know about – there's very little reason it shouldn't have been opened up to everybody. The game was making money, the closed beta was already accepting micro-transactions, so why not open up a solid, incredibly polished build to everybody and start taking on some real feedback?

What's worse is that in 2015, Microsoft even introduced the perfect platform to showcase *Fable Legends*, but the opportunity was embarrassingly ignored. It introduced Game Preview, its version of Steam's Early Access, which should have launched with *Fable Legends*. The fact that it didn't points to a colossal mis-management of the project. But then, *Fable Legends* feels like a victim of confused executives and poor advertising from the get go. It might not have been the *Fable* game we were all expecting, but it didn't deserve to be so unceremoniously killed off in the way that it was.

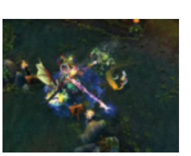
ANALYSTS BELIEVE THAT PSN ALONE GENERATED MORE REVENUE THAN NINTENDO IN FY 2015

MOBA MATTERS

Now is the time to start watching League Of Legends

→ Don't know your LCS from your LMS? Don't worry, **games**™ has got you covered as the arenas heat up for the world's biggest pro-level competition

Above *League Of Legends* competitions are becoming massive events, even in the UK as we saw at Wembley Arena recently.



Above Watching professional *LoL* can be intimidating for a newcomer, but like any sport, once you know the basics it is riveting.

Competitive *League Of Legends* is one of the most electrifying spectator sports available to anybody in the world with an active broadband connection. Honestly, it really doesn't matter whether you've already mastered a lane or are still yet to take your first steps into Summoner's Rift; the spectacle of it can be enough to pique the interest.

That all said, the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) genre is notoriously impenetrable to play for anybody that isn't already neck deep in the whole experience, and it can be as equally vexing for new viewers to watch too. This guide will look to demystify the terminology and the tournament structure, so you – the ever-curious viewer – can cut through the confusion and get yourself locked into the action this week.

If you want to watch the most exciting and innovative play in the game, you should be tuned into The League Of Legends Championship Series. Commonly referred to as the LCS by the community, it is developer Riot Games' premiere professional league for top-tier North American and European teams. Twenty of the best from across the two continents compete in region-specific leagues that run parallel, with ten teams representing North America (NA LCS) and the other ten Europe (EU LCS).

Realistically, it's up to you which territory and teams you want to try watching first – all we can do is make suggestions. Because, much like trying to get into football's English Premier League for the first time, picking your allegiance is entirely down to personal preference. It's only after watching a handful of games that you'll begin to get a sense of the personalities behind the keyboards, and that will largely inform which team you gravitate towards. For what it's worth, we have always found the NA LCS to be pretty damned entertaining on a week-to-week basis; offering the sort of upsets, surprise results and drama seen behind the scenes in traditional sports.

Thankfully, following the LCS is easier than it might initially seem. Each annual season of play is divided into two parts, one for spring and one for summer, with opportunities for promotion and relegation preceding each split. Regular weekly play consists of a nine-week round-robin tournament, which sees each contestant in the league meeting all other contestants in turn. In essence, this means that every team will play against each other team in their respective league twice – resulting in 18 games played per split. The weekly game schedule, links to the Twitch and YouTube live streams (not to mention the subsequent standings) are posted online at lolesports.com.

Each split concludes with a play-off tournament between the top six teams from each continent to determine the final standings. This is where things will often get more than a little heated; the reward isn't just hard cash, but Championship Points, which are used to determine qualification into the annual League Of Legends World Championship.

This includes the best teams from the NA and EU LCS, as well as representation from the Korean league (LCK), the Chinese Tencent Pro League (LPL) and the Master Series (LMS) that represents teams from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

Ultimately, the goal for each and every team playing competitive *League Of Legends* is securing a place in the grand finals. It'll see the best teams from around the globe clashing in southern California. On 29 October, held at Los Angeles' magnificent Staples Center, a total prize pool of $2 million dollars will be at stake; with the winning team taking home a rather cool $1 million in cash money.

This is big business. Last year's World Championship boasted huge viewership numbers, with the unique viewer count for the Final sitting at 36 million – hell, the peak concurrent viewership (that's the highest number of fans tuned in at any one time) was 14 million for the final showdown between Korea's SKT and Koo Tigers. To put that in perspective, the BBC's 2015 broadcast of the live FA Cup Final between Arsenal and Aston Villa only managed to secure a peak concurrent viewership of 8.8 million.

Considering the growth of eSports over the last 12 months, there's little doubt in our mind that *League Of Legends*' Season 4 World Championship will be the biggest eSport event in history. With the summer split kicking off for the NA and EU LCS on the 2 June, now is the perfect time to start dipping into live streams and finding your team, the one to rally behind on Twitter and Twitch chats come the World Finals this October.



Inset An amazing 36 million people watched the finals of last year's *LoL* competition.

DATA STREAM → ID WASN'T ABLE TO BEAT ITS OWN GAME DOOM IN ULTRA-NIGHTMARE MODE

> "Competitive League Of Legends is one of the most electrifying spectator sports in the world"

What happens week to week in the LCS?

Understanding the format changes for 2016

FOR 2016'S SUMMER split in the NA and EU LCS, Riot Games will be implementing changes to the weekly match structure – that is to say, how the games are played between teams each week. Sadly, as the best-of-one format is retired, it's all become a little confusing.

Teams in the EU LCS will transition to a double best-of-two format, meaning each team gets to play each side once and the total number of games played is the same for all teams – basically the same set up as football. Each game will be rewarded with a point, forcing teams to play creatively and create real separation in the standings. The threat of 1-1 ties is also very real, causing more tension for the eventual playoffs, with elimination games played if this is the case. The EU LCS matches will continue to be played across two days (Thursday-Friday), though there will now be a two-stream broadcast set-up displaying concurrent matches between 7-11 pm GMT.

The NA LCS, on the other hand, is transitioning to a best-of-three format, as North American gaming culture has a tradition of enjoying sports that avoid potential ties. The best-of-three format will mean teams play more games, but the competition will be fiercer than ever. To accommodate the extra games that need to be played, Riot is extending the NA LCS broadcast to three days a week (Friday-Saturday-Sunday) and will run two simultaneous streams to fit all the best-of-three action in.

Ultimately, this just means teams will have to work a little harder for those all-important Championship Points come the end of the summer split, though, that all said, a little competition never hurt anybody.





Teams to watch out for in the summer split

Try watching these teams if you're a new viewer



1 G2 ESPORTS (EU LCS)

Since their arrival in the EU LCS, G2 ESports has looked like the team to beat. The Spanish squad set a big record by securing the shortest average win time in the EU at 32:37, while its first-place finish in the Spring split regular season shocked many of the former top teams. G2 is the one to watch from Europe.



2 FNATIC (EU LCS)

The former powerhouse of Europe, Fnatic is always one of the most entertaining teams to watch in the entire *League Of Legends* pro circuit. Fnatic lost out to G2 in the Play-Off semi-finals, which means they'll no doubt be out for blood come the dawn of the summer split. Never count out the former champions of Europe.



3 IMMORTALS (NA LCS)

Immortals had an amazing run, with 17 wins and just one loss in the regular season spring split. After attempting some different team compositions, they failed to secure the top spot in the spring Play-Offs, though they still look like one of the stronger teams heading towards a World Finals place this autumn.



4 APEX GAMING (NA LCS)

At the end of the regular season spring split, there's an opportunity for teams from the Challenger Series to get promoted into the big league. That's what happened as Team Dignitas were relegated (producing a poor run of form at 4 wins to 14 losses) to be replaced by Apex Gaming, an all-new face in the scene.

 THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER REVEALED ALICIA VIKANDER WILL PLAY LARA CROFT IN A NEW MOVIE 

FOR THE LOVE OF COD

Modern Warfare Remastered

→ Don't just get outraged; vote with your wallet

It's our ability to make decisions that truly makes us human. Whether you loathe or love Activision's decision to bundle *Modern Warfare Remastered* in with the upcoming *Call Of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, you, ultimately, have the decision to choose whether to purchase it or let it pass you by.

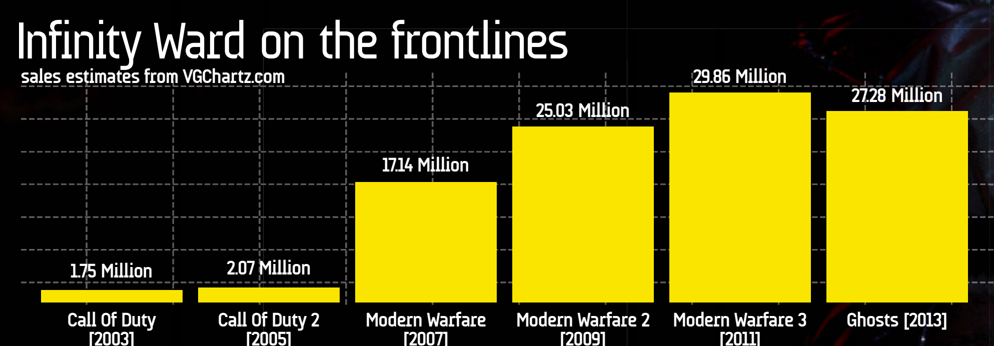
The publisher has elected to make the full HD remaster of *Call Of Duty 4* available to players who are willing to put down money for *Infinite Warfare's Legacy* (£79.99), *Legacy Pro* (£109.99), and *Digital Deluxe* (£79.99) editions. The news has made the shouty minority furious, the internet aggressively asserting that the remaster should either be sold separately or canned entirely, paving way for the unaltered 2007 release to be made available through backwards compatibility services.

But don't let nostalgia force you to pull out that debit card, because – whether you want to accept it or not – Activision certainly isn't doing that on its own steam. Sure, we love *Modern Warfare* as much as the next FPS fan, the game was a revelation, but whining about this decision isn't going to change the fact that Activision is a business first and a maker of games second. Businesses need to make as much money as they can over a financial year, so why wouldn't one look to capitalise on a product so hotly requested, especially if it can be used to fuel sales of its new multi-million dollar endeavour? This is, in part, what it means to be a consumer; supply and demand is king in the 21st century.

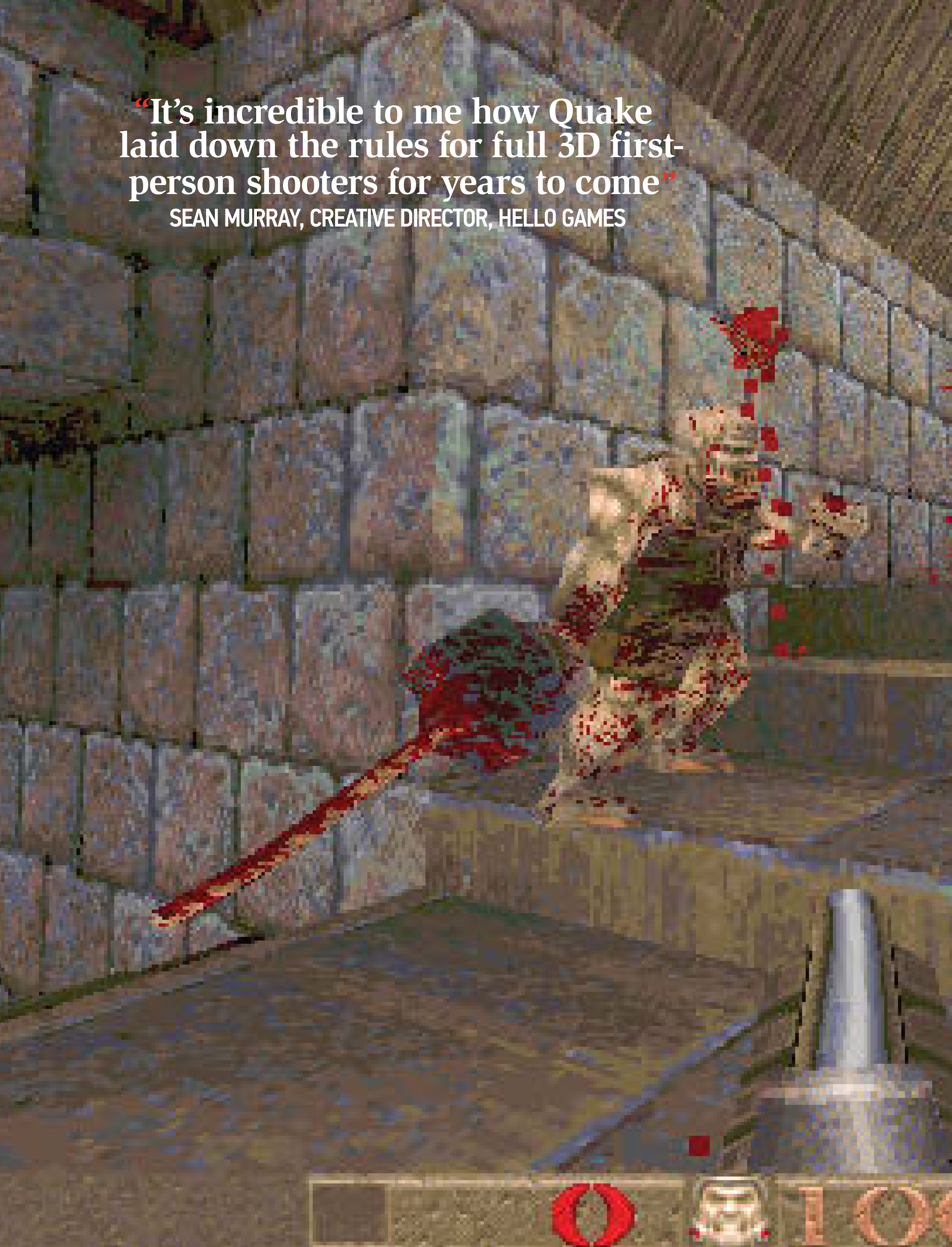
Do you believe this to be a hostile move towards a dedicated fan base? Then tell Activision in the only way that it can understand: not with a hash tag, but with your hard-earned cash. *Call Of Duty* pre-order and sales figures have been in steady decline, so what sort of message do you think it's going to send if there's a sudden spike?

From what we've seen, the *Modern Warfare Remastered* edition is looking great. In development from Raven, it'll feature the full campaign and 10 of the original 20 multiplayer maps with improved texture resolutions and a smoother 60fps, not to mention improvements to the lighting, animations and audio (among other things). But that doesn't change the fact that if you're that desperate to go back to the game that changed the FPS genre – but equally as desperate to avoid *Infinite Warfare* – then you still can. The servers are still live and your old copy of the game hasn't been destroyed overnight, so go enjoy yourself. You have a decision to make, just don't blame anybody else for what happens next.

Infinity Ward on the frontlines



DATA STREAM → CROWN AND COUNCIL IS A NEW FREE GAME FROM MOJANG, MAKER OF MINECRAFT



> "It's incredible to me how Quake laid down the rules for full 3D first-person shooters for years to come"
>
> **SEAN MURRAY, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, HELLO GAMES**



WHY I ♥...

QUAKE

SEAN MURRAY, HELLO GAMES, CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF NO MAN'S SKY

"I would always say that two of my favourite games are Super Mario 64 *and* Quake*, but given the 20th anniversary, I'll say* Quake *this time. I love it because it made me want to get into games. Seeing it, I had played lots of games, but now I had to make games. It's incredible to me how* Quake *laid down the rules for full 3D first-person shooters for years to come. Multiplayer, deathmatch, online and all that kind of thing. It just got it all right first time. And for five years afterwards most of the other games were not as good, I would say not as clear-cut… Here's something that's totally different, but it's perfect first time. I'm just amazed by that. I still don't know how they did that. Even people copying them couldn't get it as good as what id [Software] had done first time. It's amazing."*



WAGING WAR ON THE MOB

WHILE HANGAR 13 might be looking to produce an organic narrative experience in *Mafia III*, it does happen to feature familiar cover and shooting mechanics. The major difference being that Lincoln Clay is a retired war veteran, far more adept in combat than your traditional mobster or gangland soldier. This is reflected in Lincoln's sharp aim and brutal approach to dishing out violence in the swinging sixties. "We wanted to highlight Lincoln's combat training, and show how that makes him better equipped to fight the mob," says Haden Blackman, *Mafia III*'s creative director. "It gives him an edge over these mob bullies he has taken on. So, we do have dozens of takedowns in the game, including a variety of stealth takedowns, 'normal' takedowns that dispatch a stunned or wounded enemy, and 'brutal' takedowns, which will cause other enemies to recoil, giving you a window for another attack."

"The game isn't about racism, but we're definitely not shying away from it. It's necessary for us to be authentic to the time and place"

HADEN BLACKMAN, CREATIVE DIRECTOR & STUDIO HEAD



CONCEPT This is no mere rags-to-riches Italian Mafia story, it's a non-traditional take on the genre as you look to unite the various mobs found in Sixties southern America and take control of the streets for yourself

Real crime in a virtual world

To wilfully chase freedom in 'New Bordeaux' (read: New Orleans) is to knowingly choose the way of la malavita, the gang life. That, friends, is the bad life: that of crime and corruption in a sullied city. Those that take up arms against Lincoln Clay in the battle for the streets, they have wilfully chosen to walk a dangerous path; one ruled by the shotgun, and at the whims of three loyal lieutenants, each of whom jealously guards their illicit, profitable fiefdoms. In a richly cynical atmosphere, organised crime was free to flourish openly, and there were none more cynical than the inhabitants of New Orleans at the death of the Sixties, replicated with creative licence here as New Bordeaux.

Racism, violence and larceny ran unchecked through the streets, but then the Big Easy had never known it to be any other way. While Italian mob boss Sal Marcano's empire began to crumble, it may have given rise to something far worse. Because when a balance of power is shifted, and tensions rise, it isn't long before a new force rises from the ashes of the old world and grasps that opportunity by the throat.

"*Mafia III* is based on the real world, so you've got to think about these Mafia factions, how they'd actually treat each other and how they would interact. We aren't pulling any punches, it's brutal and it's visceral; we aren't shying away from any of it, and that includes the racial issues of the time and the way the world reacts to violence," reveals Hangar 13's Andy Wilson.

Take one look at *Mafia III* in action and that attention to authenticity is clear. It's a violent and uncompromising take on an intense period of American history, far from the glamorisation of criminal enterprise often portrayed in genre games such as *Grand Theft Auto*. Of course, that approach presents its own potential pitfalls, ones that Hangar 13 is obviously keen to avoid. The result is a game that feels fresh, dangerous even, with the authenticity of the era enhancing the gameplay and building a believable narrative around its violent world.

"From the outset, we knew that the tone of *Mafia III* would be more hard-boiled than the tone of *Mafia II*, if only because we set the game in 1968, which was a very turbulent year in American history," says creative director Haden Blackman, echoing the sentiments of his executive producer. "We felt that the tone of the game, the story, and even the gameplay had to be informed and influenced by the violence occurring all around the country and the world."

The violence that Blackman speaks of isn't on the edges of this culture and these characters; it's deeply rooted in the whole experience. In 1965, American troops stationed in Vietnam joined the anti-communist Southern forces in fighting the Northern communists, and the unexpectedly drawn-out war had a striking emotional and financial impact on the US itself, providing a window for opportunistic criminals to take advantage of a nation divided, gripped both by the fear of the spread of communism and the heavy military hand of the United States.

Closer to home, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan were attempting to establish white supremacy, violently fuelling racial tension. 1968 was a fiercely unpleasant era for several minority groups, and biracial war veteran Lincoln Clay was never going to have it easy. "When the game opens, it is 1968, in our fictionalised version of New Orleans [New Bordeaux]. Lincoln has just returned from a tour in Vietnam, and, through a favour to a friend, he has fallen in with the Black Mafia and found a sense of family he was always looking for – through a gangster that treats him like a brother," says Wilson, though as the Black mob is wiped out by the Italians, Clay is soon forced to return to war – albeit one on a different type of battlefield.

/// "We want to tell a compelling story about someone going to war with the Italian mob and then building his own mob in its place," says Blackman. "Given the time period and the location, we feel that having Lincoln be a member of the Black mob and a Vietnam

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4
Origin: USA
Publisher: 2K Games
Developer: Hangar 13
Release: 7 October 2016
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Hangar 13 rose from the ashes of 2K Czech, the original developer of the *Mafia* franchise. When the studio shut its doors in 2014, resources and staff were routed to the new outfit in California headed up by ex-LucasArts director Haden Blackman. *Mafia III* will be the new studio's debut title.

Developer History

Hidden & Dangerous 1999 **[PC, PS1, DC]**
Mafia: The City Of Lost Heaven 2002 **[PS2, Xbox, PC]**
Wings Of War 2004 **[PC, Xbox]**
Mafia II 2010 **[PC, PS3, X360]**

High Point

Mafia II was a daring attempt to revitalise the open-world action genre, a narrative focused spectacle that was hampered by the technology at the time.

veteran gives us a strong, complex, and interesting protagonist for the story we want to tell… it's about trying to find a place to belong, about revenge, greed and loyalty."

The result is a world unlike any other. New Bordeaux is a mirror of the real New Orleans circa-1968, a vibrant reflection of true crime in a virtual world. It's the way in which narrative, setting and gameplay come together that will set *Mafia III* apart from the competition; an impressive expansion of the *Mafia* brand without diluting the mechanics of open-world action games that we've grown to appreciate.

"As with *Mafia II,* you can expect a strong sense of time and place and a compelling narrative. But, this is also a continued evolution of the franchise. We're putting you into a world with its own criminal ecologies that you can tear down in many different ways, creating your own unique experience," says Blackman, confirming our suspicion that managing your very own criminal enterprise will be the feature that sets *Mafia* apart.

"While [Hangar 13] was drawn to the franchise because of its history of great narrative – we definitely feel that the core story is strong – we've also worked just as hard to make sure that the player feels as if they are part of driving that story forward," Blackman continues, asserting that he wants players to feel like they are co-authors of the overall experience. "We view the narrative as a series of tent pole moments, but how you get to each tent pole, and the decisions that you make as you progress, will often influence those moments, your relationships, and the outcome of the game."

It's an intriguing prospect, the ability to not only shape the progression of your story but also directly influence the fates of the characters around you in an organic and unpredictable fashion. It's this freedom that has come to define many open-world RPGs, the likes of *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* and *Mass Effect*, it was only a matter of time before it was pulled into the vicious backdrop of virtual crime and punishment.

/// Much like real conflict between mutual acquaintances, a lot of this is simmering away behind the scenes. As you push through the nine districts – from the iconic French district to the southern swamplands of the Bayou – you'll be tasked with asserting your dominance over the old Italian Mafia institution. You'll do this by blowing the lid off racketeering, drug, and prostitution rings; fighting low-level enforcers and doing your best to draw area mob bosses out into the open.

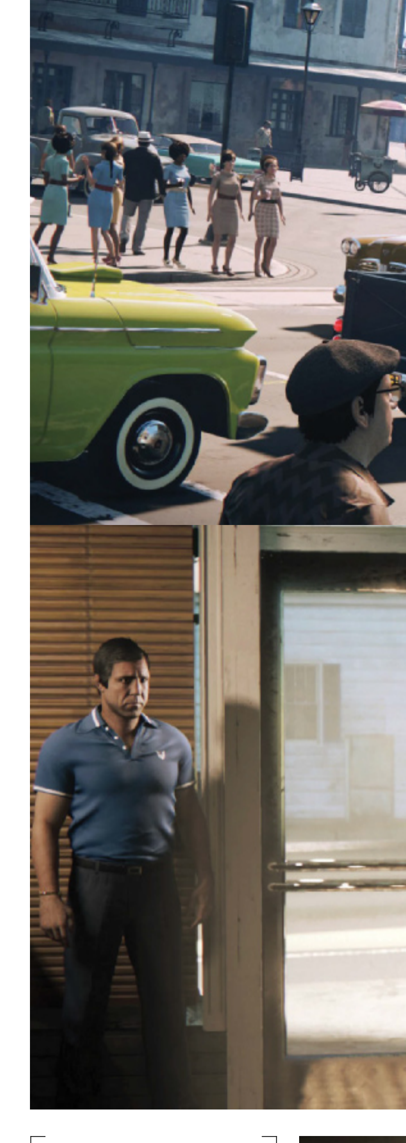
"The narrative itself is quite organic; it's not a left/right branch," says Wilson, reaffirming that the story builds in a similar fashion to that of the mission design, there are multiple approaches and outcomes to just about facet of *Mafia III*'s design. "I'm particularly excited

ONLY POSSIBLE ON THIS GENERATION

HANGAR 13 HAS produced its own proprietary game engine to handle the pressure of *Mafia III*, and the results are rather impressive. "Our proprietary engine has really allowed us to capture that sense of time and place, says *Mafia III*'s creative director Haden Blackman. "I think the art team has built a beautiful city with a very diverse population and some truly striking setpieces, but none of that would render (especially when the player is driving at high speeds) without our engine, which has evolved alongside the new generation of consoles.

"Our proprietary tech is a combination of components from *Mafia II* that we have continued to evolve and develop over time, and net new tech we've built from scratch for this game. Everything we do on the tech side is in the service of creating a rich world for the player to explore and supporting our core gameplay pillars."

> "You can also try to spread the wealth more, and keep everyone content, but there will be some rewards and benefits you'll never acquire as a result"
>
> **HADEN BLACKMAN,** CREATIVE DIRECTOR & STUDIO HEAD





Above: Missions are fairly open-ended and happen to feature an array of paths and opportunities, many of which can have small but noticeable impact on the story and dialogue from NPCs.



Above: Missions are fairly open ended and happen to feature an array of paths and opportunities, many of which can have small but noticeable impact on the story and dialogue from NPCs. Right: Hanger 13 has done its best to make the world feel as authentic as possible, which means the shimmering American muscle cars are going to be a bit of a nightmare to control. Below: Interrogating enemies can go one of two ways: get the information that you want and kill 'em in cold blood, or force them to work for you and enhance a safehouse, promote them to racket leader or palm them off to one of your lieutenants.





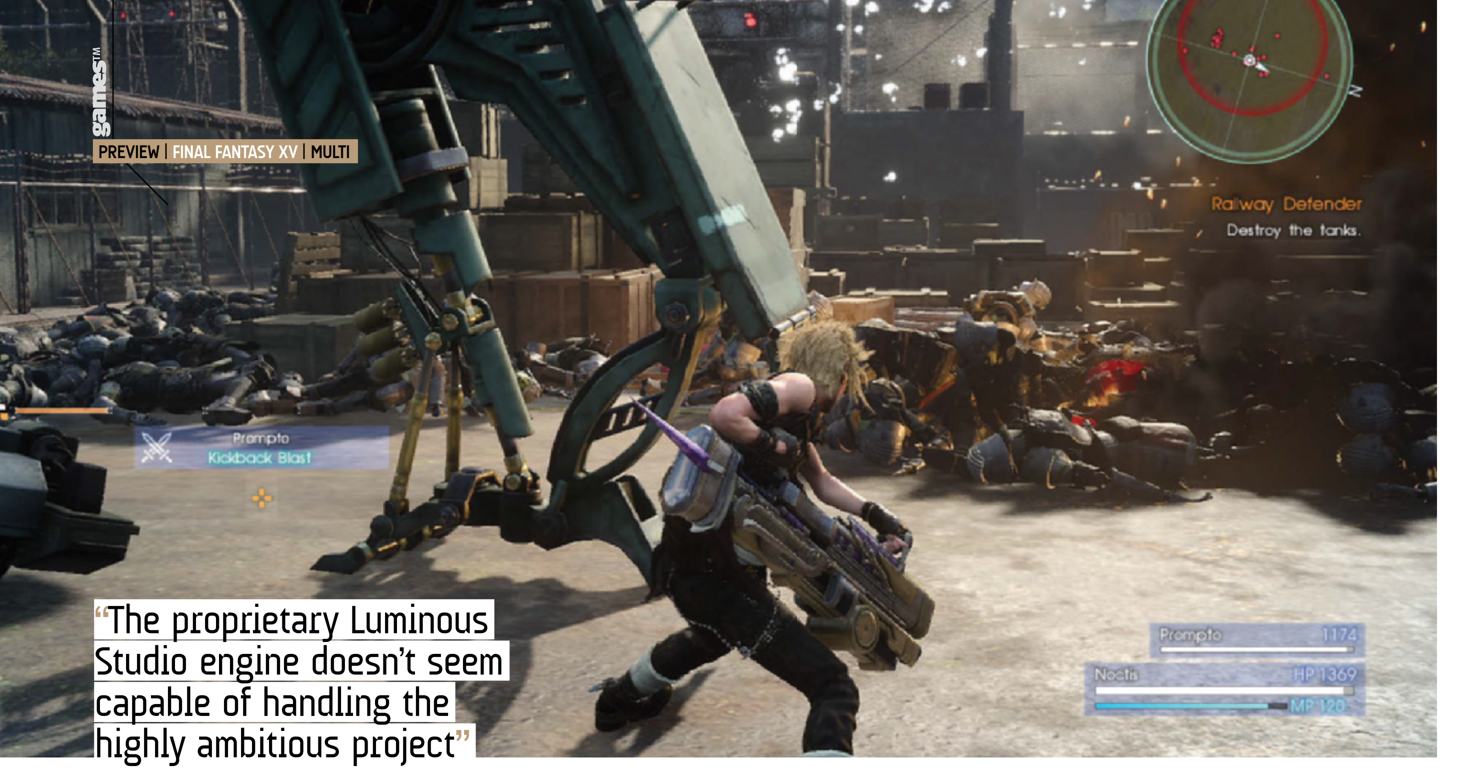
about the relationships between Lincoln Clay and the three lieutenants he recruits, continues Blackman eagerly. "This not only ties back to the franchise's strength of story, but also directly defines your experience overall on a gameplay standpoint.

"Every time Lincoln takes over a criminal racket or a district run by the mob, he has an opportunity to assign it to one of his three underbosses: Cassandra, who runs the Haitian gang; Burke, who runs the Irish mob; and [star of *Mafia II*] Vito, who runs a rebel faction of the Italian mob," Blackman teases, "in exchange for being assigned a racket or district, these underbosses offer Lincoln special gameplay-relevant rewards."

This can have wide-reaching (and sometimes violent) consequences to the direction of your story, the outcome of certain characters and even affect the type of gear, weapons and abilities available. "If you start neglecting one character, you're going to start having problems with that character and that's going to have consequences down the line," says Wilson, though Blackman asserts that this isn't a punishment but a reality of the corner you've backed yourself into by trying to run your own criminal enterprise.

"There's no 'proper' way to manage your underbosses. If you want to invest everything in Vito and let him run the city with you, that's your choice, your story. And it's a totally viable way to play with its own rewards. But, that does have consequences… you can probably imagine what a hardened criminal might do if they're passed over time and again," says Blackman, noting that your relationships with the lieutenants aren't monitored in-game, instead you'll need to look for changes in personality, attitude and communication – all three exist persistently in the world.

It's elements like this that really set *Mafia III* apart. It's flipping the traditional *Mafia* arc on its head, creating something vibrant and uncompromising in the process. The period has been under-explored in games, and the character of Lincoln Clay seems to be well considered. It's beautiful and brutal, organic and authentic, quite unlike anything we've seen from any generation of console. While Hangar 13 set out with clear development goals – "We want players to feel like stuntmen in Hollywood action films when engaging in car combat, we want players to feel as if they can play their own way, [and] we want you to feel like you own the battlefield as you progress through the game" – the strong focus on storytelling and characterisation, means *Mafia III* is coming together to be an unmissable experience.



"The proprietary Luminous Studio engine doesn't seem capable of handling the highly ambitious project"

Final Fantasy XV

CONCEPT ■ After a messy development period, *Final Fantasy XV* is finally in sight under the guidance of director Hajime Tabata, famed for his work on the Crisis Core and Type-0 spin-offs

There's no going back from here

Final Fantasy XV is going to change everything; this is no mere half-hearted attempt to drag the legendary franchise back into good repute, but an opportunity for Square Enix to finally realise a ten-year dream that started with *Final Fantasy XII.* A desire to mesh the action-genre trappings that the kids seem to love so much with the absurdly over-the-top theatrics that the old guard still hold in such high regard; a *Final Fantasy* game fit for the modern era, if you will.

With the seeds of *FFXV*'s design planted way back in 2006, we've had numerous opportunities to peek behind the development curtain over the years; though, we're sad to report, that we're not overly convinced by what we've seen lurking behind it. If last year's middling *Episode Duscae* demo was about giving us a standalone *Final Fantasy* experience in an all-new world, the recent *Platinum* demo is focused on giving us a solid glimpse into the final product.

The immediate concern then, is that the proprietary Luminous Studio engine doesn't seem capable of handling the highly ambitious project. It allows for some truly stunning environments to be realised, filled with glittering particle effects, but it seems incapable of maintaining a solid frame-rate. The camera too is a nightmare; it seems to be actively working against Noctis to ensure the platforming sections and the real-time combat is as fiddly and unintuitive as possible. The *Episode Duscae* demo suffered from similar problems, waved away by the notion that a release date wasn't in sight. This free sample of *Final Fantasy XV* can't be excused for its faults so easily; the game is going to go gold in little over three months, and the optimisation teams are going to have their work cut out for them.

Ultimately what worries us is that *Final Fantasy XV* will lack the depth that the franchise has always been celebrated for. That's hard to gauge from a demo, though we keep coming back to the dazzling Iron Giant battle – the one that has been shown off for the last three years. While you can try to re-create the dizzying theatrics often shown off in show reels – launching Noctis' sword at a building and warping out of the way of danger, rolling and zipping through attacks before launching a flurry of fluid strikes – in reality it's all too easy to hold down a single button, remove one hand from the controller and effortlessly find victory; the combat feels *Kingdom Hearts*-lite. For all of *Final Fantasy XV*'s scope, its astounding scale, humorous characters and stunning musical score, we still have deeply rooted gameplay concerns that Square Enix really needs to address before launch.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: In-house
Release: 30 September 2016
Players: 1

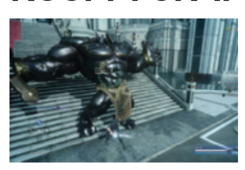
Developer Profile

Game director Hajime Tabata has paid his dues over the years with various *Final Fantasy* spin-offs and handheld expansions. Now is his opportunity to stamp his own influence on the main series and he seems to be making a raft of changes as a result.

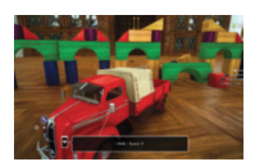
Developer History

Before Crisis: Final Fantasy VII
2004 [Multi]
The 3rd Birthday
2010 [Multi]
Final Fantasy Type-0
2011 [PSP]
Final Fantasy Agito
2014 [iOS, Android]

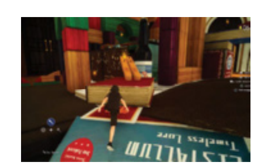
ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT



1 COMBAT
Final Fantasy has always been a deeply tactical game, and while we aren't against the idea of free-flow real-time combat, it would be great to see a little bit more depth and a better combo system added to make combat interactions a little more engaging.



2 DRIVING
Driving is a huge component of *Final Fantasy XV* – as Noctis and his rag-tag bunch of genre-typical dude bros head out on a cross-country adventure – and we've had our first taste of it in Platinum. It seemed a little sluggish, though hopefully this will be tightened up.



3 PERFORMANCE
The latest demo isn't the best demonstration of Square's new engine, with the game (on Xbox One in particular) stuttering and slowing down on too frequent of an occasion. A lot of optimisation needs to be done to smooth the frame-rate out and cut down the lengthy load times.

Mirror's Edge: Catalyst

CONCEPT ■ No sooner is Faith released from prison than she's back in the fold of her adopted family: the runners. Can she continue to fly under the radar of the corporate dictatorship?

DICE's design director Erik Odeldahl talks us through how Mirror's Edge: Catalyst is building on its legacy

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox One, PC
Origin: Sweden
Publisher: EA
Developer: DICE
Release: 9 June
Players: 1

Developer Profile

DICE has been one of the premier FPS developers for the last 14 years starting with *Battlefield 1942*. However it continues to innovate and experiment with the viewpoint as 2007's *Mirror's Edge* proved.

Developer History

Battlefield 2 **Multi [2005]**
Mirror's Edge **Multi [2008]**
Battlefield: Bad Company **Multi [2008]**
Battlefield 4 **Multi [2013]**

High Point

Last year's *Star Wars Battlefront* may not be DICE's most polished shooter, but it did mark the studio's ascension to one of the most respected and trusted developers in the world.

What was your process when defining what *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* needed to be?

We basically started with two things, and the first one was we did not want to do a game that was strictly a linear set of levels. We wanted to open up the world and the city for the player and that was the first thing. To not force or funnel them down a specific path, but rather let them choose their way to the objectives and find their own way. Basically choose what to do and when to do stuff. That was the first thing.

The second thing was actually Faith. She was always a part of it and we wanted to flesh her out as a character and answer some questions we had about not just who she is but why she's running. Why do runners exist in this world? What's their purpose? Who runs the nation? Who are the authorities?

The back story definitely seems richer than it did in the original game. Was that something that you made a priority?

Yeah; one of the first people we hired to the team – he didn't work at DICE at the time – was Christofer Emgård, our narrative director and writer. In the beginning when we worked on the concept I personally did the story work and basically created the foundation of the world, but then we hired Christofer and he's written the whole game, more or less, and really fleshed out the details of the runner's role, the corporations that run the world, the private security forces, the military…

He's also given the world a proper back-story. Why is it the way that it is? The city in the first game had no name; it was just 'The City'. We've named our city Glass, because of all the glass surfaces and we felt that it reinforced the themes reflections and stuff like that. But it's located on the Eastern coastline of a nation called Cascadia, which was founded after a big civil war against what is now a neighbouring nation. All of this plays into, in part, the storyline you'll play in *Mirror's Edge*. It's a way for us to dig into things that happen in our world, like physical oppression and mass surveillance.

We've had things like the Occupy movement happen since the original game. Was it these sort of socio-political events that were influencing you?

Absolutely. Everything that's going on around us has influenced us. Multiple times during development you end up in that stranger than fiction. 'Oh, we thought we couldn't go this far in the game, because people won't believe it', but then it happens in our world.

Has the adoption of parkour and increased verticality in FPS games challenged you to push *Mirror's Edge* further?

I think that while a lot of other games have been inspired, there hasn't been another game that has attempted to copy *Mirror's Edge*. First of all I'm super happy to see more proper, physical movement in first-person. I think it's a wonderful experience. What we've done in *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* by opening up the city for the player, we also opened up a can of worms because the game needed to be way, *way* more responsive compared to what the first game was. So, we worked a lot on branching out the animations and as soon as you input the command on your controller or mouse and keyboard you should get a response from it.

Do you think it likely that *Catalyst* will have an impact on how you approach *Battlefield* games going forward?

Quite possibly. I mean, even though we're different teams at DICE working on different games we do jump between titles. I personally worked on both *Battlefield 3* and *Battlefield 4* and the 2010 *Medal Of Honor*, and you bring your experiences and influences from one title to the next one. And it opens up new avenues to experience. *Battlefield 3* specifically was very influenced by the original *Mirror's Edge* so it just goes back and forth.

The community has been with you all the way, asking for a sequel. How important has it been in getting *Catalyst* made to have them behind you?

I think it's for us that community still plays the game and still finds ways to speedrun and break it completely, which is quite funny to see, but of course they are a big part of it. It's really important to us that we build something that fans of the first game really like. We've hired people from the community to work on the game as well.

What have you hired community members to help you with?

In this particular case, it's one of our QA guys who even had the world record at one time for running through *Mirror's Edge 1*. He's working with QA, but he's really helpful with design and pointing things out for us, because when you work on any game really you build it and you believe that people are going to play it a certain way, but Philip can point out 'Yes, but you can actually play it this way and you think you've built this, but you've actually built that'. He's been a great help. Also as a QA he's great because as a speedrunner he knows all of the ways to break games, so there's that as well.





Moving around the new city there's definitely a greater sense of a unified vision for the game, tying story, gameplay and location together into a coherent whole rather than a jumble of cool elements.

WELCOME TO YOUR PARKOUR GPS

RUNNER VISION HAS been given a bit of an upgrade for *Catalyst* with both a more reasoned explanation of why it exists (parkour instincts don't cut it in 2016) and a gameplay justification for its usefulness.

As with the original game, items in red tell you that you can interact with them and that they are on the path you want to take. It makes navigating the world a lot easier.

Faith is given a contact lens at the start of the game that offers Runner's Vision as a HUD display. This is all the more important in this new city of glass since it's a fuller open world.

Importantly in this sandbox setting the Runner's Vision will adapt like any other GPS system, switching the recommended path depending on where you run or if you miss a turn.

Above: Each region of Glass has its own look and feel, so you'll get a sense of a change between different parts of the city. Odeldahl told us that the abstract DLC levels of the original were an inspiration, but DICE wanted to keep this game more grounded. Below: Third-person take-downs and cutscenes are being used because "film language is the strongest way that western culture has to quickly get narrative across," according to Odeldahl.

Left: Faith has been developed a great deal more for this game than in the original, giving her more motivation and a clearer back story.

"It's a way for us to dig into things that happen in our world, like mass surveillance"

ERIK ODELDAHL, DESIGN DIRECTOR, DICE

Playing *No Man's Sky* is all about feeding your curiosity and natural drive to explore. If you're someone who likes to cover every blade of grass on a map, this game taps into that mindset.







Above: The procedural generation of content in the game all stems from the tireless work of the art and audio teams developing concepts and pieces that can be melded together seamlessly. It's still a mass of work for this small team.

No Man's Sky

CONCEPT Venture into a near-infinite universe of planets with procedurally-generated systems, landscapes, animals, plants and aliens and more

Art director Grant Duncan and audio director Paul Weir give us more insight into the making of Hello Games' space epic

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PS4, PC
Origin:
UK
Publisher:
Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer:
Hello Games
Release:
21 June 2016
Players:
Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Hello Games burst onto the scene with the indie hit *Joe Danger* and continued to support its stunt-bike hero with sequels and expansions across multiple platforms before starting work on this massive new undertaking.

Developer History

Joe Danger
2010 [Multi]
Joe Danger 2: The Movie
2012 [Multi]

High Point

Successfully launching the original *Joe Danger* as a four-person team back in 2010 was a great start, but *No Man's Sky* is far and away this studio's biggest achievement to date. As the launch approaches, it only looks more impressive.

1 THIS WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN MADE AT A TRIPLE-A STUDIO

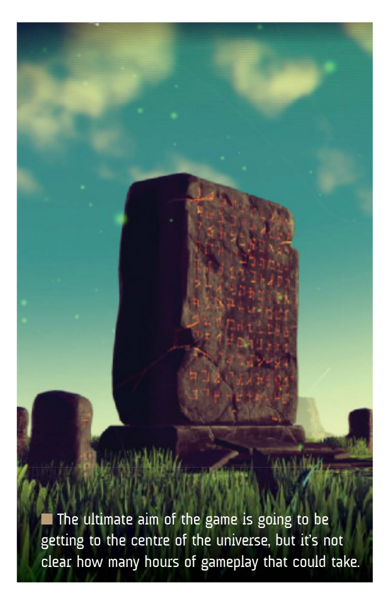
"I remember talking to one journalist a few years ago and he was saying 'Imagine if a triple-A studio was going to produce a procedural game!' The reality is that they wouldn't, they would just throw 2,000 artists at it and produce a million different art assets, and it would end up being this massive beast whereas because we've been forced to try and make as much with as little as possible we've had to be quite wily and clever, I suppose."
GRANT DUNCAN

2 EVEN THE DESIGNERS ARE SURPRISED BY THE GAME

"What I'm doing more [as the audio director] is chasing what other people are doing, because the whole game is a delicately balanced system. In a conventional game, you need to have a pipeline; an art asset gets made and you have to make a sound effect for it. It's manageable, you know what's going on. With this, it's like going hunting for things. Just playing the game – I didn't know you could blow up an asteroid and get assets from it! I just didn't know! And this is the game that I'm working on - it happens all the time with this bloody game! [laughs]"
PAUL WEIR

3 THE TEAM DOESN'T CARE MUCH FOR THE HYPE

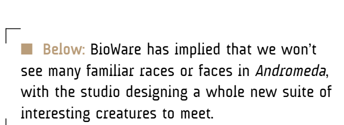
"It's a bit of a double-edged sword, I think. On the one side, we started as an indie studio of four people making a game that nobody cared about. Every single piece of anything, any time people wrote about us online, we'd have worked very, very hard for that person to take notice. Now, we're in a place where people care. You spend a long time chasing that, and then suddenly *everyone* cares, and you almost want to say 'Everyone, stop caring!' There's a definite external pressure. But we try not to let it influence us; we're just going to carry on making the game we've been planning to make for all these years."
GRANT DUNCAN



The ultimate aim of the game is going to be getting to the centre of the universe, but it's not clear how many hours of gameplay that could take.

4 IT'S BEEN PHILOSOPHICALLY EYE-OPENING

"We tried to be influenced by reality as much as possible. Even though we're creating these alien worlds, if you look on planet Earth you'll find some pretty crazy, alien-looking things in the environment… from a philosophical point of view, it definitely makes you look at the night sky in a slightly different way. It's not a pleasant thing, I don't think. It makes you feel enormously insignificant and small. I try not to think about that too much; I don't think many people do.
GRANT DUNCAN


Below: BioWare has implied that we won't see many familiar races or faces in *Andromeda*, with the studio designing a whole new suite of interesting creatures to meet.



Mass Effect: Andromeda

CONCEPT After letting the dust settle for a few years after *Mass Effect 3*, BioWare is back with *Andromeda*; the game that's going to kick off a new trilogy and bring the franchise into a new generation

Has BioWare been training us to be the bad guy?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox One, PS4, PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: BioWare
Release: Q1 2017
Players: 1-TBC

Developer Profile

Bursting onto the scene with *Baldur's Gate* (after its mech opener of *Shattered Steel*), BioWare has come to specialise in RPG-making of the highest order. From *Knights Of The Old Republic* to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, it has continued to pursue new levels of story-telling excellence.

Developer History

Baldur's Game **1998 [PC]**
Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic **2003 [Xbox, PC]**
Mass Effect **2007 [360, PC]**

High Point

Mass Effect 2 stands out as BioWare's best execution of sci-fi adventure, branching narrative and player agency. The final battle is one of the most heart-wrenching or joyous parts of the game, depending on the path that you took.

Commander Shepard had to make some tough decisions during the events of the original *Mass Effect* trilogy. From wiping out entire species to toppling sovereignties, chemically castrating a race through inaction, and too often steering the crew of the Normandy into deadly peril, it was a torturous journey. But Shepard isn't to blame, not really, because it was us controlling their actions from a sofa all along – we were the comfortable puppet masters of galactic-wide death and destruction.

BioWare has been training us over a decade of play to make the difficult decisions, an integral quality as we prepare to invade the Andromeda galaxy in the 2017 sequel. While this is based on, admittedly, unconfirmed information, we are fairly confident we can believe it. Publishers like EA have this tendency to accidentally reveal a ton of information about their upcoming games in marketing surveys; it happens to Ubisoft *all the time*. And so we are able to get a small insight into what's to follow, connecting the dots by sifting through everything from emotional Commander Shepard speeches to mountains of N7 Day concept art and teases.

"*Mass Effect: Andromeda* takes players to the Andromeda galaxy, far beyond the Milky Way, where players will lead the fight for a new home in hostile territory – where *we* are the aliens – opposed by a deadly indigenous race bent on stopping us… this is the story of humanity's next chapter, and player choices throughout the game will ultimately determine our survival in the Andromeda Galaxy," says the leaked survey.

> "Players will lead the fight for a new home in hostile territory"

In essence, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* sounds like a hostile take on *Star Trek*. From what we can piece together, Shepard – at some point during the events of *Mass Effect 3*, when things were at their most perilous – sent a new crew of humans to, well, you know: 'explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.'

Where *Andromeda* will differ from previous *Mass Effect* games however, aside from allowing us to explore a "seamless open-world galaxy", is that it's making us the enemy. We are arriving in a brand new galaxy as an unknown, hostile, species; the last remnants of humanity fighting to colonise planets and ensure the continuation of the race at all costs.

Of course, whether BioWare actually has the confidence to set a new trilogy around us being the scourge of the universe, or whether it tries to frame it around a holier-than-thou motivation, remains to be seen – but we're excited to find out. As we cast our eyes over the leaked survey we have to wonder, is it just marketing speak or the plot for one of the most exciting games of 2017?

"There is a major battle brewing, and it awaits you," the survey says. "It is unfolding across a galaxy of planets, with creatures and species entirely unknown. Draw your weapon, because the fight is bigger than you thought. It's not just for your own life, it's for all of humanity – the ultimate battle for a place we can all call home."



SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON











MANUAL SAMUEL

Format: **PC, Xbox One, PS4**
Publisher: **Curve Digital**
Developer: **Perfectly ParaNormal**
ETA: **Summer 2016**

1 Given the option by a sadistic Grim Reaper type, would you rather live for 24 hours or spend an eternity in hell? Ah, wait, before you answer, there's a caveat (isn't there always); if you decide to take the 24 hours, you'll need to control your every action. And when we say every action, we mean it – this includes having to move limbs independently of one another and control your own breathing. It can make even the smallest tasks, such a getting dressed or going to the bathroom, an unfortunate and hilarious mishap waiting to happen. And that's *Manual Samuel* for you; described by its creators as "*Monkey Island* meets *QWOP*," it's a bizarre adventure game wrapped in insane rag doll physics.

GIANT COP: JUSTICE ABOVE ALL

Format: **HTC Vive/PC**
Publisher: **Other Ocean Interactive**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Autumn 2016**

2 The best thing about VR is its ability to offer experiences that simply haven't been possible before now. Developer Other Ocean Interactive has been able to put these tools to great use, making you a big cop in a little city. *Giant Cop* has you playing as a literal giant cop, fresh out of the academy to do good deeds in Micro City. That is easier said than done, though; as you stomp around the tiny city hunting for criminals, you'll need to try to pick them up and chuck them behind bars without causing too much chaos around you. Being able to stamp around in a virtual space, physically reach out and interact with characters and crouch to get a new perspective on the environment just feels great.

THE TURING TEST

Format: **Xbox One**
Publisher: **Bulkhead Interactive**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Autumn 2016**

3 *The Turing Test* is one of those mind-melting puzzle experiences designed for a rainy Sunday afternoon; with nowhere to go, you give in to some vexing first-person puzzles and obtuse narratives that veer into theological territory. *The Turing Test* is from the folks at Bulkhead Interactive – the team behind *Pneuma: Breath Of Life*. This is, in essence, a spiritual successor. The pretentious voiceover of its predecessor has disappeared, replaced with conversational dialogue that muses on the end of humanity, while the puzzle platforming seems far more considered. It has a really intriguing sci-fi vibe to it, the Unreal Engine 4 is helping deliver some stunning visuals and the challenge is *very* real.

REIGNS

Format: **iOS, Android**
Publisher: **Devolver Digital**
Developer: **Nerial**
ETA: **Summer 2016**

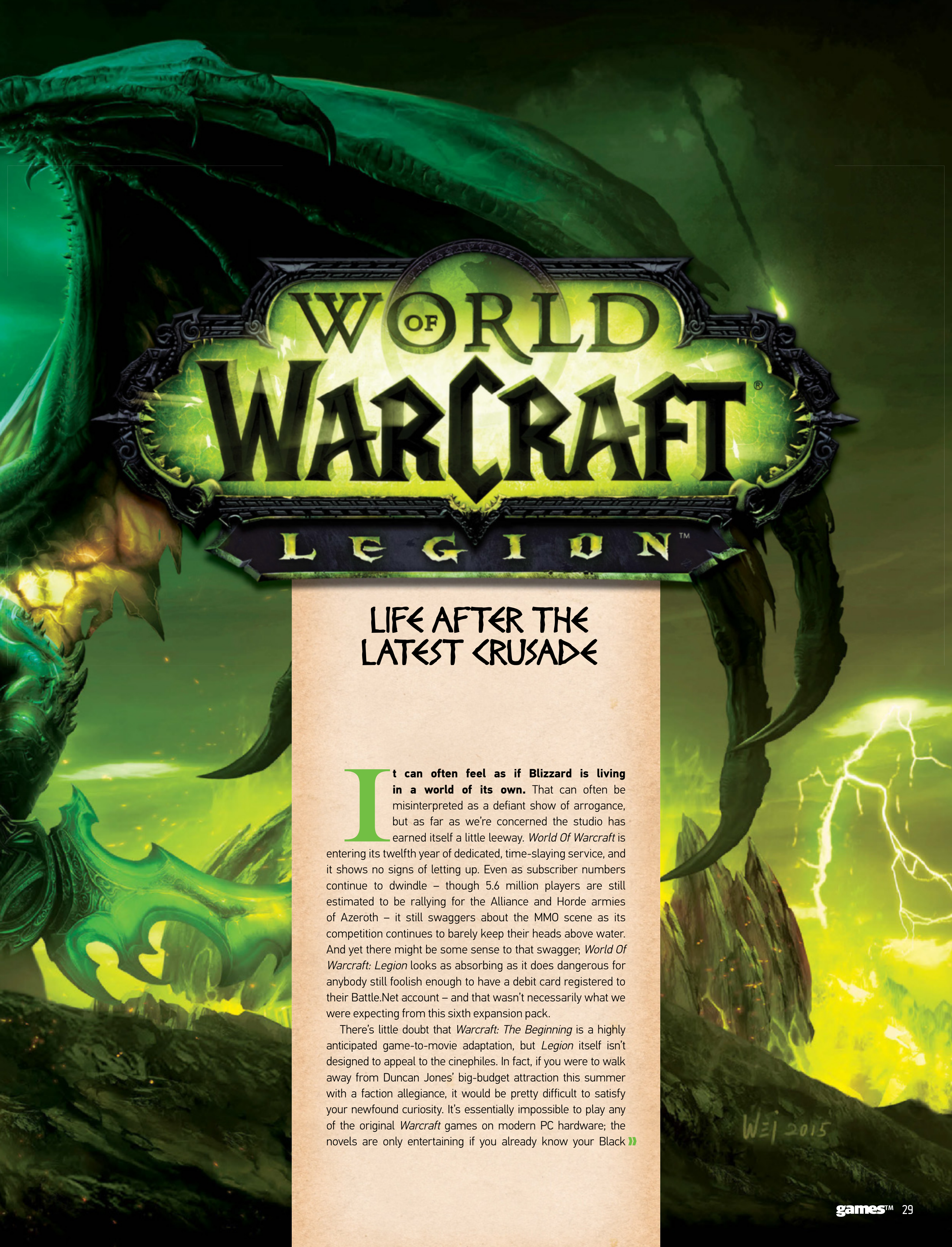
4 A perfect example of how to meld complexity with accessibility in a mobile-centric era of casual gaming, *Reigns* is what happens when you play *Age Of Empires* by way of Tinder. But instead of trying to find your medieval monarch a suitor, you'll be swiping to impose your will upon a kingdom. A never-ending gauntlet of requests are beamed directly to the screen from your loyal subjects, and it's up to you to swipe left to ignore the request or right to take a chance on it. Each decision can have short and long-term consequences to your kingdom's resources, and can even impact your lineage, should you prove to be incapable of making responsible use of your royal fingers.

SHADOWHAND

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Grey Alien Games**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Summer 2016**

5 Yes, it's another card battler, but wipe away the cynicism and prepare to want to play solitaire. *Shadowhand* comes from a prolific development partnership that delighted gamers last year with *Regency Solitaire*, and this successor shows just enough evolution to have us counting down the days until its release. Here you'll be spending your time moving through a visual novel by winning solitaire-style card battles, bolstered with RPG elements as you aim to collect items and weapons for protagonist Lady Darkmoor to fend off her rivals. *Shadowhand* is a take on a classic card game that you can easily while away a few hours with before you realise how much time has passed.





LIFE AFTER THE LATEST CRUSADE

It can often feel as if Blizzard is living in a world of its own. That can often be misinterpreted as a defiant show of arrogance, but as far as we're concerned the studio has earned itself a little leeway. *World Of Warcraft* is entering its twelfth year of dedicated, time-slaying service, and it shows no signs of letting up. Even as subscriber numbers continue to dwindle – though 5.6 million players are still estimated to be rallying for the Alliance and Horde armies of Azeroth – it still swaggers about the MMO scene as its competition continues to barely keep their heads above water. And yet there might be some sense to that swagger; *World Of Warcraft: Legion* looks as absorbing as it does dangerous for anybody still foolish enough to have a debit card registered to their Battle.Net account – and that wasn't necessarily what we were expecting from this sixth expansion pack.

There's little doubt that *Warcraft: The Beginning* is a highly anticipated game-to-movie adaptation, but *Legion* itself isn't designed to appeal to the cinephiles. In fact, if you were to walk away from Duncan Jones' big-budget attraction this summer with a faction allegiance, it would be pretty difficult to satisfy your newfound curiosity. It's essentially impossible to play any of the original *Warcraft* games on modern PC hardware; the novels are only entertaining if you already know your Black »

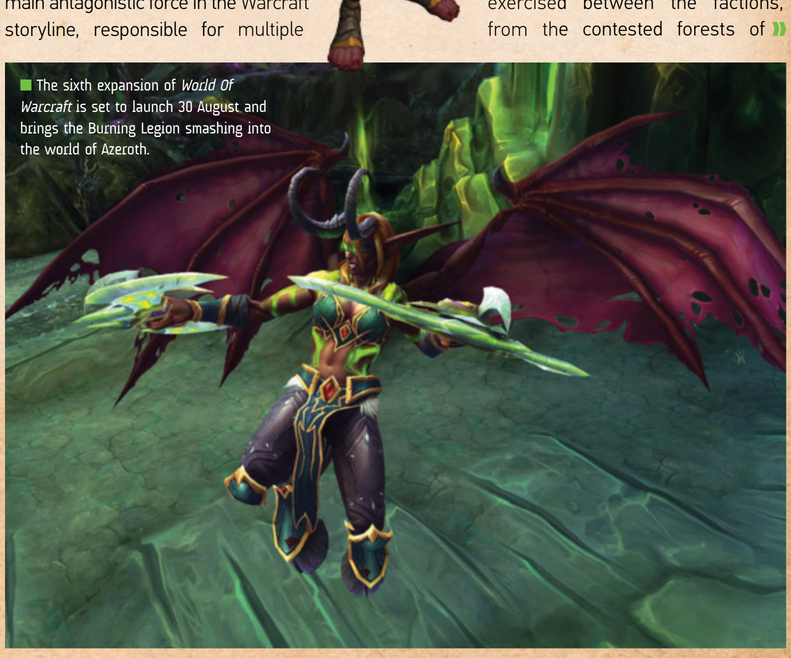
» Temple from your Hellfire Citadel; and *Legion* is readily taking aim at only the most dedicated of Blizzard fanatics. If ever there were a time to overhaul the story, take a back to basics approach to MMO design and rein in the schlocky fantasy elements, surely it would have been now, on the eve of a multi-million dollar Hollywood adventure flick. But this is Blizzard we're talking about. The studio is focused on delivering what its most faithful players are interested in, and that should be commended.

The most intriguing aspect of *Legion* isn't the epic new hero class, nor is it the visually stunning Broken Isles locale, or the new features it's offering up to refresh aging systems. It is, instead, how Blizzard seems to be entering into its very own endgame of sorts. To be clear, that isn't to say *Legion* will be the last expansion to *World Of Warcraft*, or any indication that Blizzard is losing interest in its behemoth franchise – especially with the likes of *Hearthstone*, *Heroes Of The Storm* and *Overwatch* creating so much renewed interest – but simply that *Legion* is beginning to tie up some of the storylines that have been nearly two decades in the making.

There's a particular focus on dealing with the mayhem that exploded out from 2002's *Warcraft III: Reign Of Chaos*; the Burning Legion, an army of demons that have been seeking revenge on Azeroth ever since they were repelled back to the Twisting Nether. The Legion are undoubtedly the main antagonistic force in the Warcraft storyline, responsible for multiple invasions, Orc corruptions and the creation of the almighty Lich King – basically, whenever Blizzard needs another raid or expansion, the Legion has always been on hand to engineer another catastrophe.

That's why we get the feeling *Legion* won't offer the sort of one-and-done storyline that we've come to expect from Blizzard. Players have been waiting to crush the Legion for a while now, and it isn't likely the organisation's most powerful leaders are going to just sit in a dungeon atop a glistening mound of purple loot; casually waiting to hand it out like Halloween candy to any raid group that beats them into submission. Instead, we're expecting a new corruption to spread out across Azeroth and have lasting ramifications; the likes of which hasn't been seen since the Cataclysm, the Legion an unrelenting foe that will force *Warcraft* fanatics back into the game and keep them there until a new, somehow bigger, threat can emerge.

This is going to be a move that takes some getting used to. The two sides to *World Of Warcraft* are hardly known for their capacity to work in union, though Blizzard continues to assert that the Horde and Alliance will need to unite in order to overcome this invasion. In the long term, we aren't certain what this means for the layout of Azeroth – were it to come under heavy, game-changing sieges, then perhaps the lines between Stormwind and Orgrimmar will blur. For now, it's clear there's a fair amount of resentment being exercised between the factions, from the contested forests of »



■ The sixth expansion of *World Of Warcraft* is set to launch 30 August and brings the Burning Legion smashing into the world of Azeroth.

■ Enemies in the four starting level areas now scale from 100-110, meaning you are free to go off exploring wherever you want in the Broken Isles without fear of getting destroyed.

"BLIZZARD IS FULLY COMMITTED TO APPEASING AS MANY RIDICULOUS FAN REQUESTS FROM OVER THE YEARS AS POSSIBLE"



ANATOMY OF A DEMON HUNTER

Introducing World Of Warcraft's latest class



NUMBERS OF WARCRAFT



OVER **100 MILLION** UNIQUE PLAYERS

PLAYED ACROSS **244** COUNTRIES & TERRITORIES

ALLIANCE **52**%

HORDE **47**%

1% NEUTRAL

500,000,000 MILLION CHARACTERS CREATED

MORE THAN THE POPULATION OF THE **US** AND **RUSSIA** COMBINED

6,000,000 MILLION WORDS

THE IN-GAME TEXT IS THE EQUIVALENT OF **12** COPIES OF **THE LORD OF THE RINGS**

© Designed by Freepik



"WHENEVER BLIZZARD NEEDS ANOTHER RAID OR EXPANSION, THE LEGION HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON HAND TO ENGINEER ANOTHER CATASTROPHE"

» Shadowmoon Valley to the battlegrounds of the Deepwind Gorge.

But until that comes to pass, thankfully, we've got the alpha to indulge our inability to wait until August. It's already displaying what we suspected it might: Blizzard is fully committed to appeasing as many ridiculous fan requests from over the years as possible. This was a trend that started in *Warlords Of Draenor*; a story set in an alternate version of Draenor, appealing to slavish nostalgic devotion to the franchise rather than tempting in fresh blood. You want a raid in the Emerald Dream? You got it! Oh, you like Dalaran, do you? Well, it's back as the main hub for *Legion*! Wait, you miss class-based quests? Don't worry, they're being phased back in. Are you still whining about what happened to the badass Illidan Stormrage? Don't worry, he's back and cooler than ever – and for once, you will be *very much* prepared.

In fact, Stormrage fans will be particularly happy with the new Demon Hunter; the level 98 starting class that's arriving in the Broken Isles with two ridiculously cool glaives, an array of swift melee attacks and brutal dark magic attacks. And don't you worry about losing those weapons after five levels of adventuring; they are a perfect introduction to the new artefact system that sees player pick up specialised class and spec weapons from unique quest lines, designed to increase in power as you level up – you can even upgrade and customise them at the all new Order Halls.

Playing as a Demon Hunter in *Legion* might well be the best way to experience the game as a total newbie. Pre-ordering *Legion* gives you one free level-100 instant character boost; as long as you steer clear from dungeons and 'looking for group' experiences (at least until you understand the basics) this should be the easiest way to jump into the exciting new quest lines and areas. *World Of Warcraft* is so stripped back compared to its earliest iterations – with new spells auto-equipping to your action bar and the talent/character upgrade system devoid of the complexity it was once defined by. In many respects, despite *World Of Warcraft* having a decade of baggage, it's never been easier to play and understand what you're doing – even this late to the game – as long as you have a little patience and dedication.

This is an aspect of the game that reared its head in *Warlords Of Draenor*, and is being fully realised here – a bigger focus on solo play and exploration to keep you entertained between the weekly raids. From the off, you are free to explore the Broken Isles freely, with the four starter zones scaling with you from level 100-110. This means you are no longer moving slowly from area to area, worried that you're ahead or behind of the recommended levels and accidentally skipping quest lines. You're now in a position where you can follow strongly directed stories as you please and dip in and out of areas when you get bored. It means you can better co-ordinate with friends old and new, no longer restrained to hitting cap as quickly as you can. *Warcraft* has had socialisation problems for many years now, and this is a step in the right direction. From what we've seen, the Broken Isles are filed with rare bosses to best, hidden treasures to loot, bonus zones for extra XP and a ton of fun and fluid quests. Blizzard may be relying on its history for the *Legion* expansion, but it's at least taken steps to ensure the game is as fun to play as possible for all.

World Of Warcraft isn't the most technically proficient MMO on the market, but it's arguably still the best. There's something magical (and terrifying) about stepping back into Azeroth, the feeling of familiarity is immediate and welcomed. *Legion* may be pulling *World Of Warcraft* into its endgame, fulfilling a story years in the making, and sure, it may feel a little too safe, too catered to existing fans, but that's Blizzard. Thankfully, there's always another adventure on the horizon, another big bad to be bested and, thanks to the *Warcraft* movie, hopefully another few million players to spam group chat in the major cities for years to come. »



WARCRAFT: THE BEGINNING © LEGENDARY PICTURES & UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

HOW FAITHFUL IS WARCRAFT: THE BEGINNING TO THE FRANCHISE?

Our friends at **SciFiNow** report from the set

There's no surefire recipe for success in Hollywood. That seems to be doubly true when you consider the procession of awful videogame-based films we've had to endure over the years. Whether it's a terrible casting decision, a mishap in the editing room or simply a mismatched director and script, videogame adaptations are rarely good for anything more than a Razzie award nomination. But something feels different about *Warcraft: The Beginning* – and not just because we have more level 90 characters tied to our accounts than we know what to do with.

The film is tapping into a franchise with an established, rich history and while you may approach quest text in-game with a 'TL;DR' defiance, every single line of it fleshes out the world and its characters. That puts Warcraft: The Beginning in a better position than most, even before the addition of the $100,000,000 budget allotted to the movie by production company Legendary Pictures.

And if that weren't enough reassurance, *Moon* director Duncan Jones is on board, along with producing partner Stuart Fenegan, both of whom are long-time *Warcraft* players. They have helped to assemble a fantastic cast and crew to collaborate on a hybrid style of film-making – real elaborate sets have been created by *Star Wars* prequels production designer Gavin Bocquet, which are to be later enhanced by virtual extensions – and to ensure that the film is as loyal to the source material as possible. That comes in part from a dedication to ensuring that everybody involved with the project has a genuine emotional tie to *World Of Warcraft* in one way or another.

"One of the first questions we asked people when interviewing them," says Fenegan, "was, 'What do you know about *Warcraft*?' Bill's [Westenhofer, visual effects supervisor] response was, 'I'm a level 90 mage, I have a level 90 warrior and a level 90 hunter,' so we thought, 'Okay, that's a yes!'"

"There are stories like actor Daniel Wu ("Gul'dan)," counters producer Charles Roven, "whose wife convinced him that he couldn't miss this opportunity, because she was such an avid gamer."

"They just had a baby," adds producer Julian Share, "and she said, 'You can either share parental duties, or you can make my dreams come true and be in *Warcraft*!' Rob Kazinsky (Orgrim Doomhammer), another one of our actors, is a big gamer, and he's our barometer for everything. He walked into the Lion's Pride Inn set, and tears were running down his face because he was so impressed by how much we were able to capture that feel."

INFORMATION

As the orcs flee their dying land of Draenor, the humans of Azeroth stand in fear of their approach and prepare for war. As the Dark Portal opens the gates between these two worlds, is war between these two peoples inevitable?

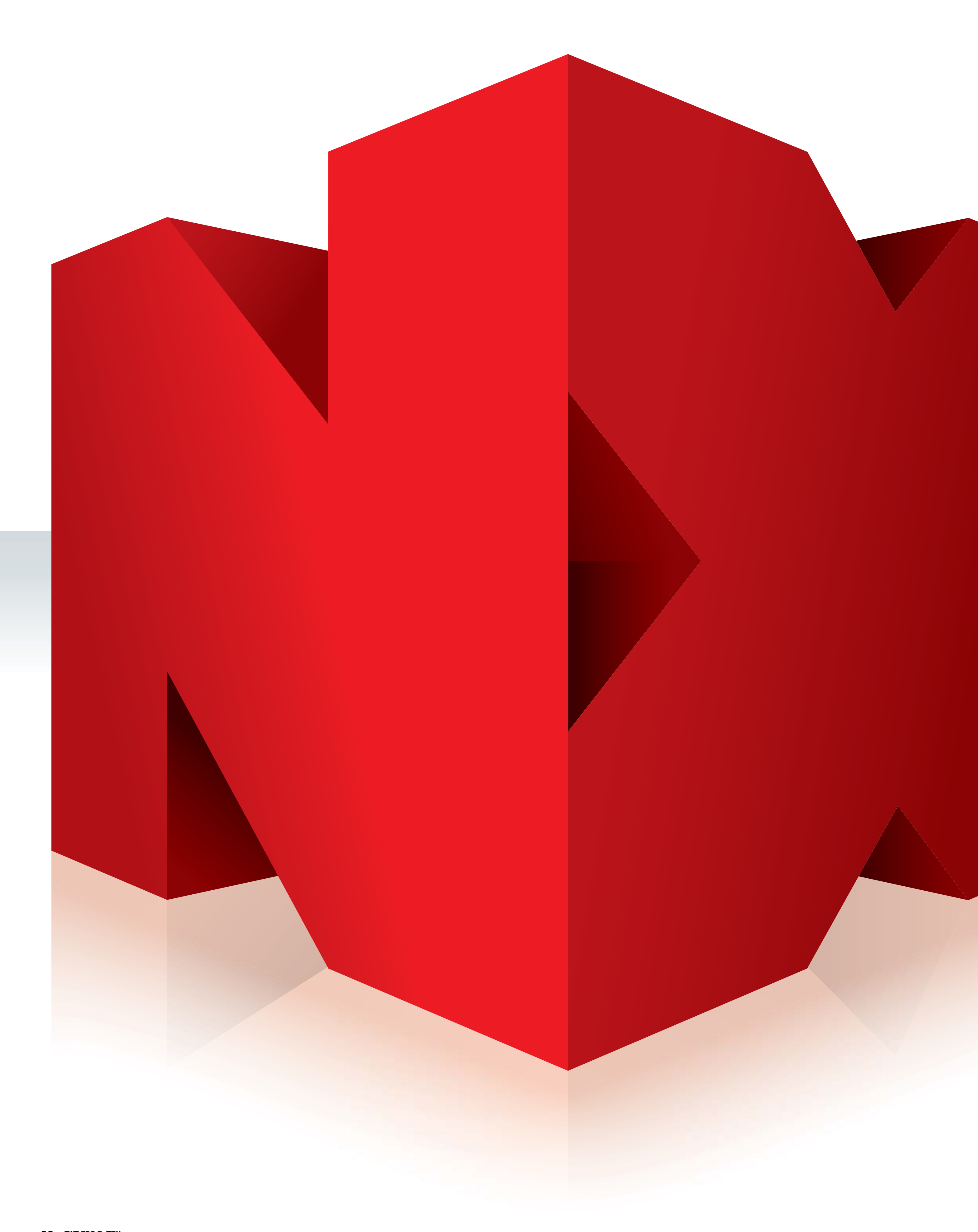
DETAILS

Release:
10 June
Director:
Duncan Jones
Screenwriters:
Charles Leavitt, Duncan Jones
Cast:
Travis Fimmel, Paula Patton, Ben Foster, Dominic Cooper, Toby Kebbell
Distributor:
Univeral Pictures
Running Time:
123 mins

For the *Warcraft* fan, this should come as hugely welcome news. But a love of the source material doesn't guarantee success; just look at what happened to the likes of *Max Payne* and *Prince Of Persia*. But from what we've glimpsed of the film so far, it looks like Jones has been able to truly capture the feel of Azeroth. Although, for those of you looking to take your first steps into the rift this summer, you shouldn't be concerned if you don't know your Orcs from your Taurens – the production team has worked hard to ensure there's enough here for newcomers to enjoy, as well as the diehard fans.

"We wanted to give it a sense of 'the beginning'," says Roven, "and we also wanted to reference one of the great things about *Warcraft*, which is that there are two sides, the Horde and the Alliance. That's the great thing Duncan brought to the script when he rewrote it so the film is told from the point of view of the citizens of Azeroth, led by Stormwind, and the point of view of the Orcs.

"What we've tried to do is create a film that will engage you by investing in both sides of the story. You've got the warring Orcs as the irresistible force, and the humans of Azeroth as the immovable object, but you're going to be invested in both, so the emotional stakes are even higher."





WHAT TO EXPECT FROM NINTENDO NX

The NX is on the near horizon. With a March 2017 release window confirmed, **games™** looks towards the future, analyses the speculation, and investigates what the house of Mario needs to do to succeed in the current generation of gaming

Nintendo has spent the better part of the decade on the edge of irrelevance in the home console market. It's been difficult to watch this sorry state of affairs unfold; while Sony and Microsoft wasted no time in moving millions of PlayStation 4s and Xbox Ones into living rooms around the world, Nintendo languished in third place, despite the Wii U coming out of the gate first. It struggled to justify the second-screen ambitions of the Wii U to its internal studios, let alone third-party developers and gamers. After the recent strides made in the mobile market, disappointing sales figures reported from both the console and handheld divisions – not to mention a giant internal shift of personnel – many expected Nintendo to simply fade from prominence. To go the way of its old rival-turned-partner Sega and spread its wealth of IP amongst the other platform contenders.

But that couldn't be further from the case. Nintendo is back in a big way, defiantly preparing to launch an all-new console, mid-cycle, in an effort to restore balance to the industry. As Sony is successfully delivering experiences 'for the players', as Microsoft continues to force parity between Xbox and PC gamers, Nintendo is in a position to truly innovate and surprise.

That's why the industry needs Nintendo. It provides balance, it creates game experiences that aren't available anywhere else and it does so in an impressively uncompromising fashion. That is, after all, what Nintendo has always done best: it's a survivor. If you take the Wii out of the equation – its flare of success didn't quite seem to be understood or be able to repeated by the company – it's been a slow, steady decline for Nintendo's home console sales since the SNES in 1990. The NX needs to break that streak, and it's looking to do that in the most appealing way for gamers.

The NX is going to approach this seemingly impossible task with a focus on impressive hardware, not gimmicks; an array of incredible exclusives, not party games. The NX is about Nintendo reclaiming its place in the big three, about the company going back to its roots and innovating in ways that its rivals are unable or unwilling. When Nintendo's new console launches in March 2017 with *The Legend Of Zelda* leading the charge, it won't be looking to compete in the VR space, nor will it be engaged in the battle for multimedia supremacy over Input One or trying to once again bottle and repeat the success of the Wii; from what we've heard and seen through cautious investigation, the NX will be the console the Nintendo loyalists have been waiting for. More than a box that gets dragged out for infrequent yet peerless first-party adventures (or the occasional family gathering), but a console that demonstrates Nintendo's ability to coax the very best out of both its concepts and developers. Nintendo is about to upset the status quo with a real console that invites those who may think of it as the 'kids console' to think again. »



The Wii U has struggled in terms of sales, but critically its games tend to do well. Once again Nintendo is facing a crossroads for its console future.



What do we want to see from the **NX?**



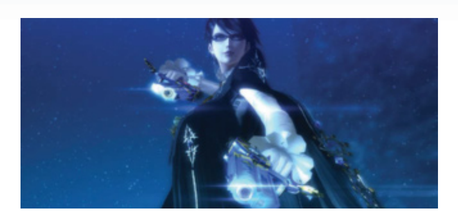
A CLEAR FOCUS

1 If any complaint can be levied at Nintendo, it's that it failed to properly communicate its intentions and aspirations with the Wii U. Nintendo can't afford to make this mistake again, and it'll need to come out with a clear message and vision as it unveils the NX. A focus on the hardcore needs to be accompanied with a strong line-up; families need to be approached with a robust suite of online protection and privacy features; the casual gamers need tech that's non-intrusive and easy to understand. Nintendo's image and appeal is diverse, and it's never faced a greater challenge.



POWERFUL HARDWARE

2 The Wii U may have had the best of intentions, arriving with hardware on par with that of the Xbox 360, and an envious line-up of first-part exclusives and enhanced third-party editions, but it simply couldn't compete with the next-generation of consoles just around the corner. NX rumours continue to gain credibility, though, with it looking almost certain that AMD is equipping Nintendo's new venture with a chipset that'll put it in direct competition with Sony's PlayStation 4 – absolutely necessary if Nintendo wants to compete in the same market.



STRONG THIRD-PARTY SUPPORT

3 Nintendo can no longer be content to be the 'second console', the one you own to dust off at parties and for the slick Nintendo exclusives. The company needs to put together a comprehensive package that can reasonably compete with the offerings from Sony and Microsoft, and that means (perhaps more importantly than anything else) it needs strong third-party support. Relationships with publishers needs to improve, there needs to be parity in quality across all three systems, and a little timed or console exclusive DLC wouldn't hurt either.



INNOVATION AND CREATIVITY

6 Say what you will about Nintendo, but the company sure does know how to innovate its hardware. The NX needs to uphold this tradition, but without becoming another gimmick. An innovative console architecture will give the NX a base to build solid, impressive core game experiences – the rumoured second-screen controller that will let you remote play your games from anywhere with an Internet connection will be the killer app. Whatever hardware innovation Nintendo introduces here, it shouldn't be at the behest of the games.



PREMIUM HARDWARE

7 Consoles are a luxury, and the design needs to reflect that. We don't want to see another machine or peripheral that looks like it fell off a Fisher Price manufacturing line. At this stage of recovering its console greatness, Nintendo needs to do something it has never done before, and release a console that looks powerful, premium and expensive. If the NX really is as powerful as the PS4, then it needs to have the looks to match the prowess; this needs to be a device that sits underneath the TV and makes you the envy of all your friends.



A STREAMLINED EXPERIENCE

8 If, as the patents and inside chatter suggests, Nintendo is launching the NX with a controller that acts as its own portable gaming system, then it needs to be intuitive and streamlined. In fact, this should be a development goal for the company. Every aspect of this console – from the UI design, online infrastructure, Amiibo support and second-screen functionality – needs to work smoothly, unencumbered by long loading times or puzzlingly abstract design decisions. The NX will need to allow apps, online systems and games to run simultaneously.

NX Myths busted

You shouldn't believe everything you read on the internet



POWERFUL AS PLAYSTATION4K?

■ As speculation continue to build, citing Sony unveiling a hugely powerful PS4 update in 2016, there's been talk of Nintendo matching – if not surpassing this – spec list. Insiders report the NX will have "good specs" and will likely be comparable to the original PS4.



WILL THE LEGEND OF ZELDA WILL BE NX EXCLUSIVE?

■ With Wii U sales dwindling and rumours of production shutting down as early as 2018, rumours of *The Legend Of Zelda* becoming an NX exclusive have been heating up. This is false; versions for both the NX and Wii U have been developed in tandem, and it'll arrive in 2017 for both systems.







A BETTER ONLINE INFRASTRUCTURE

4 Compared to the competition, Nintendo's current online infrastructure is pitiful. Online gaming is the bedrock of the Xbox One and PlayStation 4, and it's time Nintendo accepted this reality as it prepares the NX for launch in 2017. Adding friends shouldn't require the exchange of lengthy friend codes, playing online should be easy and intuitive, and connecting with strangers around the world should be effortless. We're heading towards a digital-only future, and the NX can't afford to overlook the importance of online gaming.

NEW IP FROM THE START

5 Nintendo is the master of the franchise. *Mario* and *Zelda* are two of the longest-running (and best-selling) series in gaming, and that's down to the high-bar of quality associated with the brands. That said, it's always great to see Nintendo foster new IP and deliver all-new experiences. The NX is reportedly going to offer developers a lot of power to play with, and we'd love to see this be utilised to introduce a new era of Nintendo. If *Splatoon* has shown us anything, it's that there's an audience still hungry to see Nintendo innovate with genre conventions.



ENTERTAINMENT APPS

9 If Nintendo truly wants to compete for the top spot again, it'll need to allow the array of entertainment apps we've come to expect to be a part of its new console. Nintendo needs to accept that home consoles aren't just about games these days – you shouldn't have to turn on a competitor's console to go and enjoy other entertainment – and it needs to be ready at launch with these apps. It would also be wise for Nintendo to update its views on YouTube and Twitch streaming; game capture and sharing are such huge parts of the gaming landscape, it's vital to include them.



CONSUMER-FRIENDLY ENGAGEMENT

10 Realistically, everything mentioned so far will be rendered void if the console itself isn't consumer friendly. The marketing push for the Wii U was a disaster and Nintendo may repeat this mistake, as insider talk continues to indicate that the console and controller may be revealed separately – opening the possibility that we'll all misunderstand the system. If Nintendo wants to succeed in this highly competitive market, it needs to be completely clear and concise on what it is offering – otherwise the NX will likely be the last home console Nintendo releases.

CAN IT AVOID THE MISTAKES OF THE PAST?

NINTENDO IS EAGER to avoid the numerous missteps it has made with the Wii U and, in a very different way, the 3DS. Speaking during the 75th Nintendo AGM, the late Satoru Iwata spoke extensively about the problem launches of its recent hardware and how it plans on avoiding making them again.

"For Wii U in particular, in cannot be said that it had a successful launch. As for Nintendo 3DS, in Japan there was a temporary slowdown but we managed to make a recovery by offering a number of initiatives collectively. On the other hand, Wii U had not been able to recover at this point in time," he says, adding, "with regard to the launch of Nintendo 3DS and Wii U not necessarily having progressed well and not acquiring sufficient support from software publishers, we intend to offer NX through a Nintendo-like solution."

What that Nintendo-like solution could be is anybody's guess, though the company *has* already been hard at work on preparing "joint initiatives" with third-party publishers. This is in an effort to ensure that the NX has a strong offering at launch and beyond. Third-party support is imperative, and will be no easy task: not only does the NX need to be as powerful as the current-gen hardware, its architecture needs to familiar to developers – the harder it is to port games across, the less likely they are to appear. The NX can't just be another console that survives solely on Nintendo exclusives, as good as they may be.





WILL IT LOOK LIKE THIS?

■ This uncomfortable looking controller appeared online, from two different sources, seemed to match a previously filed patent incredibly closely. Despite looking incredibly real, it all turned out to be a hoax from a NeoGaf user who was handy with a 3D printer.



A SIMPLE REPLACEMENT FOR THE 3DS AND WII U?

■ While it once seemed as if Nintendo was leaving the dedicated console market, that has proven to be incorrect. The NX isn't going to be a simple replacement for the 3DS and Wii U, but a whole new pillar in Nintendo's business model moving forward, to run alongside them.



THE DEVELOPER VERDICT

We sit down indie developers who have successfully worked with Nintendo this generation to get their insight on Nintendo NX



ADRIAN GOERSCH Co-founder Black Forest Games



GRAHAM SMITH DrinkBox co-founder and COO



CHRIS KINGSLEY, Co-founder, CTO Rebellion



MEL KIRK, VP of Publishing at Zen Studios

Views expressed here are those of the individuals spoken to and do not necessarily reflect those of their respective studios

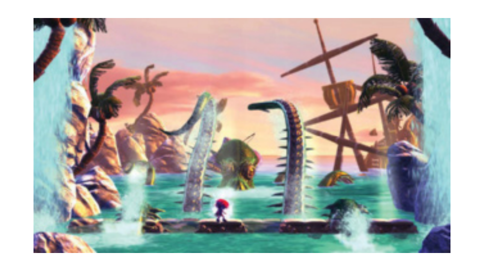
"How would you like the NX to improve on the Wii U as a platform to develop on?"

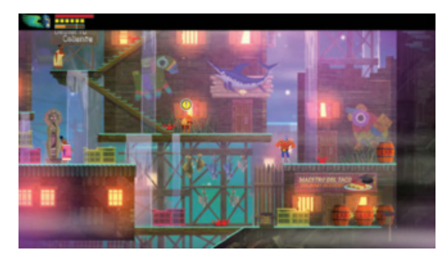
SMITH: The Wii U was actually a great platform to develop on. With *Guacamelee*, having the second screen on the GamePad was a perfect place to put the game's mini-map, and made the game a great fit for the platform. Having the ability to play games right on the controller itself was an amazing feature for times when someone else in the household was making use of the television. While this was never a problem for Drinkbox, I believe that the limited power of the system made it difficult for some third parties to bring their games from PS4/Xbox One to the Wii U, causing the system to have less than ideal third-party support.

KINGSLEY: In general, I'd like to see a console that has comparable or more power than PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, and with familiar input systems. For an independent like Rebellion, you want to support as many platforms as you can, because you want as many people to play your games as possible. As a developer, of course it's exciting to work with completely new paradigms but we all have to consider the economic realities too. I'd like to see Nintendo putting in more effort to work with other third parties so that the NX isn't just a great earner for Nintendo, but can be a great earner for everyone else.

GOERSCH: Beside more power, which everyone assumes it will have, the main improvement we would like to see are on the side of the Nintendo submission processes, support and tools. Everyone who ever had to create a Wii U emanual knows what we are talking about.

KIRK: We are hopeful that whatever platform Nintendo makes takes steps towards the future in big ways. More horsepower, the integration of VR in some way, platform support for different business models, and an easier publishing process would all be very welcomed. The Wii U certainly posed challenges for developers on a lot of fronts, but Nintendo is a company that the development community will support as long as the opportunity exists. It is hard to be critical, so I hope the new platform paves the way for success for everyone over the course of its lifetime.





"Do you think it's important we have a strong Nintendo console in the industry?"

CK: It's always important to have healthy competition as it forces everyone to raise their game, keeps everyone on their toes and makes sure everyone works with other people in the industry to get the best result for everyone. It adds buzz and excitement.

MK: Nintendo has such an important place in the history of the industry, and I think we all hope it has an important place in the future; the industry is much healthier with a strong Nintendo. I know that Zen Studios is better off with a strong Nintendo, and we are always rooting for its ideas and ready to support its initiatives.

GS: In the console hardware space, Nintendo seems to be more of a risk-taker than their competitors. While some of these risks have been flops (Virtual Boy), there have also been some major successes. The Game Boy and the Wii both changed the way people play games, and brought games to huge new markets. You can never be quite sure what to expect next from Nintendo, and I do think that it's important that they continue to innovate in the console hardware space.

AG: I believe for gamers it is important to have consoles with a clear profile that differentiates them from others. Less from the technical point of view but which target groups they are aiming at and how strong they focus on it. As a developer, the point is to have a strong platform with more restricted access than Steam or the App Store, for example. Yes, it is harder to get there but if you make it, there is a better chance to actually earn some money. Also an important point for gamers is to have a minimum level of quality you can expect. Nintendo has brought us so many great games and I personally expect to see more of that on a competitive Nintendo console.



"Do you think a new Nintendo console could realistically complete with Sony and Microsoft?"

CK: Yes, of course. If anyone can, Nintendo can because they have done in the past. To be really successful they do need to nurture a healthy development ecosystem for the NX and put a lot of effort into encouraging as many developers as possible to work on NX. They've also taken quite a lot of stick for their approach to online functionality in the past, but I with think Miiverse, Miitomo and the DLC support for *Mario Kart* and *Splatoon* they've shown they're able to offer their own special twist in this area.

GS: People are quick to forget, but Nintendo has competed favourably with Sony and Microsoft in many of the previous generations of consoles. Just glancing at VGChartz, Nintendo has holds 7 of the top 15 slots for all-time console hardware sales. Nintendo is also the holder of many exclusive properties (*Mario*, *Zelda*, *Metroid*, *Smash Bros*) which are beloved by millions of people, and Nintendo knows how to leverage this. It's too early to say with any certainty how the NX will do, we don't even know what it is yet, but I'm optimistic that they will create something that will be competitive with the current Sony and Microsoft consoles.

MK: I don't know enough to give a yes or no answer here. I do know that Nintendo is capable of creating some amazing, groundbreaking hardware that will get people excited and interested enough to at least consider a purchase. You know that Nintendo will bring their amazing games and franchises in a big way, and if they can get decent third-party support rolling then the games will be there as well. Things can change quickly; not so long ago everyone was saying consoles are dead and this generation would be a bust. Well, that couldn't be further from the truth!

AG: I don't believe the point is to compete, the point is to offer something for your own target audience. If they would deliver an Xbox One clone, only Nintendo's IPs are strong enough to even make that a big success.

"What else would you still like to see from Nintendo's NX console?"

MK: I would like to see Nintendo once again genuinely engage with third-party developers. Sure Nintendo has the characters we love and always will, but in today's climate you must support the development community in order to have a healthy ecosystem. I look forward to seeing how Nintendo does this on NX.

CK: I'd love to see NX become a platform that publishers and developers can rely on, so they can invest and make great games on NX right now and so they can keep on making great games for in the future.

GS: Simply that it has powerful enough specs to compete with the current generation of consoles. This might prove challenging if they have a handheld standalone component to the console, but I really hope they can pull it off!

AG: I would like to see fewer gadgets, and a button-smashing-only *Mario Party*.

"Is there anything revealed or rumoured about the NX so far that has excited you?"

GS: The biggest rumour that has me excited is that the controller will have a screen that will allow you to bring your games with you to play outside of the home. This has been done in a more limited form with PS4/Vita Cross-save, but I love the idea of every game I buy on a system having support for this.

AG: Beside the fact that there will be a more powerful Nintendo console and that I expect all the great games that should have been on the Wii U finally being released? No, actually nothing special.

CK: I don't think I've seen any rumours with any substance to be able to say. There have been some fantastic spoofs which got a lot of attention, and which just shows how much interest there is in the industry and public at large for a new Nintendo console.

MK: I try not to get too excited about hardware rumours; until we have actual specs in hand, it's hard to be excited. I'm still getting a grip on how awesome VR is, so once that wears off maybe I'll look into some rumours. What does have me excited is the prospect of new games – a new *Luigi's Mansion* or a new *Zelda* always get the excitement levels up! »

> **"I don't believe the point is to compete, the point is to offer something for your own target audience"**
> **ADRIAN GOERSCH**





THE NX HARDWARE SPECS

What you can expect from Nintendo's new machine in terms of raw power and connectivity


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AMD at the core The processor maker has been at the heart of this generation of hardware providing the processors in the Wii U, PS4 and Xbox One, so it's no stretch to imagine Nintendo will turn to the company again for its new console. x64 AMD APU seems like a good shout, being the processors used in the current console generation.

More powerful than the PS4? There have been contradictory reports on this, but given that it will have been three years since the launch of the PS4 by the time the NX arrives it would be fair to assume that using the same processing cores with updated understanding and implementation would see some performance improvement. Beyond that, we don't have enough information.

Full screen controller A Nintendo patent for an oval shaped controller with a full-bleed screen has created a lot of excitement about what might be possible with the NX, evolving the controller screen concept of Wii U to something much cooler. It would also be a touchscreen, meaning that it could have custom buttons mapped to it.

Gaming on the go While the touchscreen controller hints at a standalone mobile device, what seems more likely for NX at the moment is a device that can support continued second-screen access to your favourite games even when you're not directly playing them, such as exploring maps for setting up *Mario Maker* levels. Perhaps some smaller games might also be playable on it directly, not unlike a PS Vita's base functionality.

Cloud gaming A patent filed by Nintendo described a machine that could use "supplemental computing devices," to boost performance. Some have speculated this would mean plugging in additional devices to boost the power and capabilities of the main console unit, but it sound a lot to us like cloud streaming to us.

It won't be like the Wii U or 3DS And, importantly, it won't be replacing them either. Nintendo has made clear it considers this new machine to be something entirely different, which speaks to a whole new approach to what a console can and should be.

THE GAMES TO EXPECT

We predict the NX launch line-up

SUPER MARIO GALAXY 3

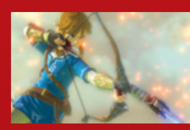
Development team: Nintendo EAD Tokyo Software Development Group No. 2
Genre: Platformer



It's odd to think that there hasn't been a 3D *Mario* game on Wii U yet in the tradition of *Super Mario 64* and the *Galaxy* games, which makes it all the more likely that any such project (and it seems sensible to assume there is one) has been held as a potential NX launch title with features that exploit the new hardware.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA

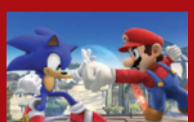
Development team: Nintendo EAD Software Development Group No. 3
Genre: Action/adventure



In a repeat of the release of *Twilight Princess* back in 2006, all signs are now pointing towards a simultaneous release of *The Legend Of Zelda* on two generations of hardware. Given the expected specs of the NX however, we would think that this version will be the most desirable. It was already looking impressive too.

SUPER SMASH BROS.

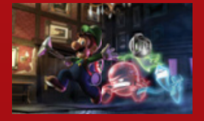
Development team: Sora Ltd./ Bandai Namco Entertainment
Genre: Fighter



While initial rumours pointed to a remaster of 2014 Wii U brawler, the latest chatter appears to be that Bandai Namco is working on a brand new *Smash Bros* for the launch of NX next year. That would be a pretty incredible way to kick off a new console as this series remains one of the biggest draws for Nintendo.

LUIGI'S MANSION 3

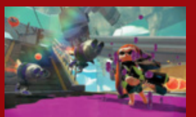
Development team: Nintendo SPD Production Group No. 3
Genre: Action/adventure



Nintendo has been giving a lot more love to Luigi in recent years and a return to the mansion seems like a smart play. The obvious applications of the NX's second-screen functionality with a ghost hunting game make it all the more attractive. It could be the best fit for a hardware demoing title at launch.

SPLATOON

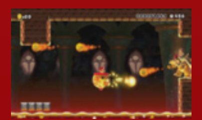
Development team: Nintendo EAD Software Development Group No. 2
Genre: Shooter



Rather than a sequel to Nintendo's surprisingly popular shooter, the word is that a remaster is in the offing. If the NX also gets improved online functionality and easier connectivity between players then it makes sense to get its best example of online gaming out on the console fast.

SUPER MARIO MAKER

Development team: Nintendo EAD Software Development Group No. 2
Genre: Platformer



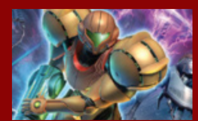
There's no doubt that *Super Mario Maker* has been one of Nintendo's biggest and most surprising success stories in some time, but will it appear on NX? Insiders report that Nintendo will only port the game across if it is able to do so with player data and creations intact, which is proving problematic.

TIME FOR A REVIVAL

The lost Nintendo titles waiting in the wings

METROID

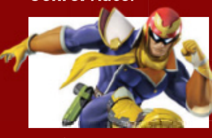
Development team: Retro Studios
Genre: Shooter



We're going to ignore the existence of *Federation Force* like most *Metroid* fans and instead state that there hasn't been a new Samus Aran game since *Other M*. Now, whether or not this franchise returns in FPS or platformer form (we'll happily take either) is unclear, but it feels like the right time for a proper *Metroid* experience on console.

F-ZERO

Development team: Nintendo EAD
Genre: Racer



Captain Falcon remains one of the most popular characters on *Super Smash Bros* and the friend of meme-makers everywhere, but if his cultural impact wasn't enough reason to bring the Captain's game back, *F-Zero* would make a great technical benchmark for the new console. High-speed racing is a great showcase for processing power.



WHAT MARKET IS THE **NX** GOING TO LAUNCH IN?

THE **NX** AT HOME

The state of the Japanese games industry Nintendo is looking at

- The Japanese games market made **¥321 billion** in 2015, dropping 13 per cent year-on-year
- Software sales dropped 16 percent to **¥191 billion**
- Console sales down 8.5 per cent to **¥130 billion**
- Mobile revenue rose 18 per cent to **$645 billion**

Lowest value of the games market since 1988

JAPANESE INSTALL BASES

What the NX will be competing against at home

Console	Install base
3DS	20.57 MILLION
PS4	2.61 MILLION
Wii U	3.12 MILLION
Xbox 360	1.66 MILLION
Xbox One	0.07 MILLION
PS3	10.41 MILLION
Wii	12.75 MILLION

NINTENDO'S TOP FRANCHISES

The best-selling games worldwide

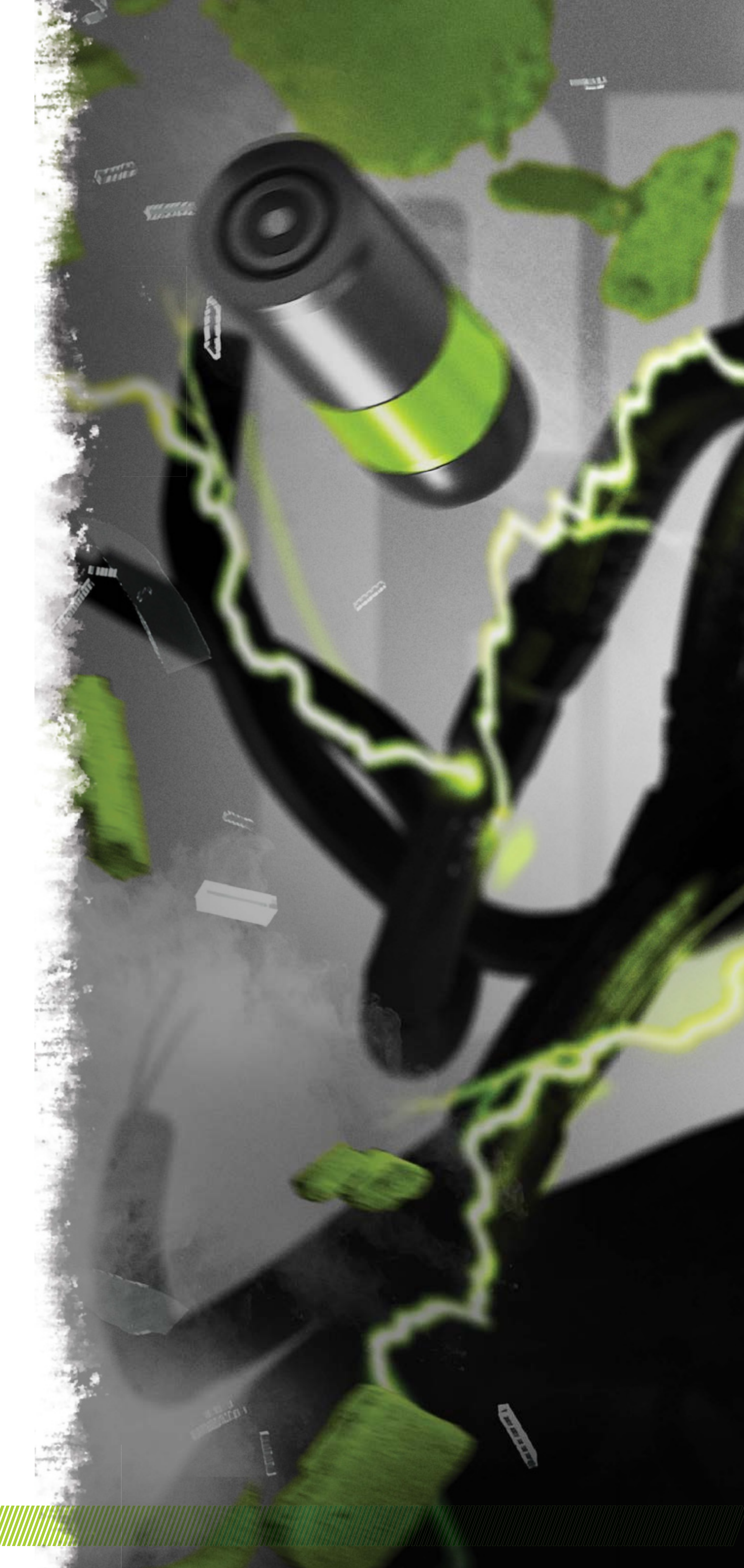
Franchise	Sales
Super Mario	311.46 MILLION
Pokémon	279 MILLION
Mario Kart	110.77 MILLION
The Legend Of Zelda	75.57 MILLION
Donkey Kong	56.04 MILLION
Mario Party	39.6 MILLION
Super Smash Bros	37.94 MILLION
Kirby	35.78 MILLION
Mario Sports	35.49 MILLION
Animal Crossing	25.25 MILLION

EXAMINING 30 YEARS OF NINTENDO

Console	HARDWARE SALES (MILLIONS)	SOFTWARE SALES (MILLIONS)	ATTACH RATE
NES [1985]	62.91	500	7.94
GAME BOY [1989]	118.7	501.1	4.22
SNES [1990]	49.1	379	7.72
N64 [1996]	32.93	224.9	6.83
GBA [2001]	81.51	377.4	4.63
GAMECUBE [2001]	21.74	208.5	9.59
DS [2005]	154	947.8	6.15
WII [2006]	101.63	913.1	8.98
3DS [2011]	57.94	264.5	4.56
WII U [2012]	12.6	79.3	79.3

BLESZINSKI BLASTS BACK

The legendary developer talks to us about his new outlook, as we take his gravity-defying shooter LawBreakers for a spin



Cliff Bleszinski is as close to a game development rockstar as this industry has ever known. Like many of the great pop stars there have been nicknames, personas, and a sense of a creative evolution that has inspired and driven the industry he contributes to. He was of course originally Clifford Michael Bleszinski, a native of North Andover, Massachusetts, creator of *The Palace of Deceit: Dragon's Plight* when he was just 17 years old and later *Jazz Jackrabbit*. He would go on to became the face of *Gears Of War*, perhaps more so than its lead character Marcus Fenix. The man we sit with now is the head of his own studio in Raleigh, North Carolina, making a brand new FPS, *LawBreakers*, and is referred to by his colleagues as simply Cliff.

"Being a little bit older, I pick my battles! It's one of those things, you know, as you get a little bit older you don't always have the energy or even really care," Bleszinski begins as we discuss his personal journey to the head of Boss Key Productions. "Game developers *love* to argue – I'm like, 'Is this the hill you want to die on? Pick your battle.' There are times when I'm like 'This *is* the hill I want to fucking die on. Let me win this one.' But one of the things I've found as CEO is that everyone knows I have the power to say 'Do this feature because I said so', but you'd rather convince somebody it's the right thing to do because it's the best thing for the game and the project and the company."

This is a very different guy to the one we used to see on E3 stages. More mature in outlook and temperament, head shaven thanks to a recent charity event, sporting a *Rick & Morty* shirt (one of his favourite shows of all time along with *Game Of Thrones*, he tells us later). It wasn't so long ago that he had decided to leave the games industry altogether, feeling "fried after doing this since I was 17 years old," but the ideas just kept on coming. Only a couple of years later, Boss Key has *LawBreakers* in a place where it can begin alpha testing and as we played the game and chatted with the rest of the development team, it became clear that there was a unified drive to make this shooter great. »



"Everyone knows I have the power to say 'Do this feature because I said so', but you'd rather convince somebody it's the right thing to do"

Every character in the game can use blindfire behind them, meaning that even when you're being pursued you can give yourself some defence. It's not always going to be super effective, though. What it is great at though is propelling you in low gravity zones.

A PC OUTLOOK

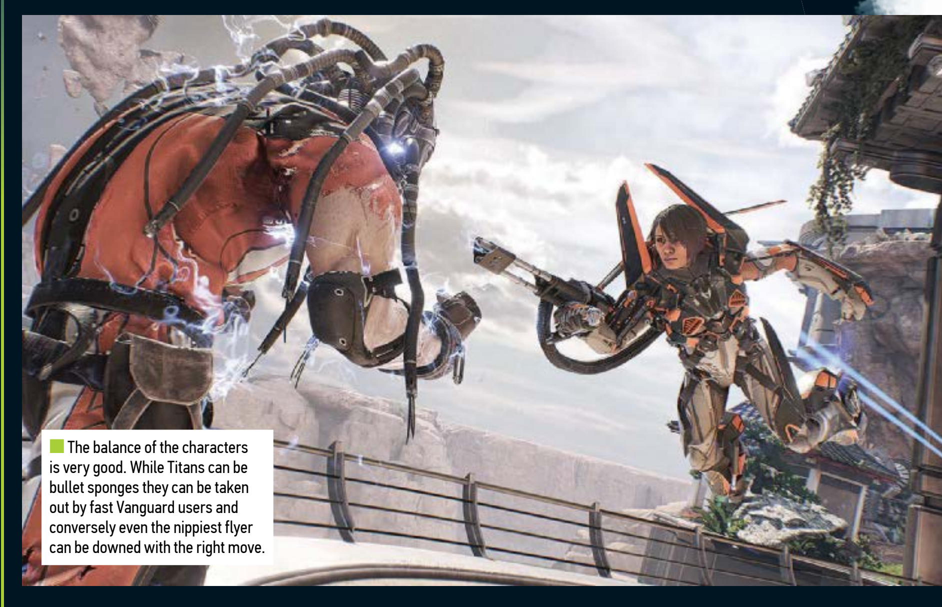
Bleszinski explains why LawBreakers is PC-only and why console is possible, but not on the agenda

Despite his great association with one of the breakout franchises on the last generation of consoles, Cliff Bleszinski's latest isn't currently in development for PS4 or Xbox One. "I'm often asked, 'Will there be a console version?'," he tells us ahead of his presentation of *LawBreakers*. "Maybe; there are some discussions going on. It remains to be seen. It wouldn't be us doing it. We want to stay at the 55 headcount or so, maybe go up to 60, but we want to keep the studio feeling medium-sized like family. Whoever, if we get around to doing it, is going to port this game, they're going to have a tough time with it. Which means we leverage the keyboard and mouse really, really well with our setup. I think you'll see that through and through this is a PC game first and foremost."

When we sat down with him afterwards we asked why he thought PC was the way to go and why talk of moddable, more PC-like consoles seems to be gaining traction. "PC's biggest strength is its moddability, the fact that people are still making, still gaming on it," he tells us. "And you have Steam, which is just a juggernaut. It's one of those things; consoles are cool and they're fine, but you're dealing with a closed platform versus an open one. And when you have an open platform, that's where you get the tinkering. People can really mess with things and modify things. *Counter-Strike* came out of the modding community, MOBAs came out of the modding community. So many great things have come from that. You look at Valve and how they made *Portal*, how that came from an indie game that was developed on the PC. Somebody in their garage in Boise, Idaho or wherever, who has a computer that they can tinker with, might have a vision for modifying an existing product on PC that can take it from good to great. That's why that eco-system is a great thing."







The balance of the characters is very good. While Titans can be bullet sponges they can be taken out by fast Vanguard users and conversely even the nippiest flyer can be downed with the right move.

"We've all been working together for probably less than a year as a group, because not all of us were here at the same time, so to have us all come together in the way that we did to create a game that's really fun in the short period of time that we have done is a testament to everybody's willingness to do what it takes to make this thing work," Tramell Isaac, Boss Key's art director explains to us. "You can't really ask for more than that. We have our disagreements, but the mantra of the studio is 'No bullshit'. We come into it knowing that we're going to have a discussion about something. As long as you're willing to have that discussion, those discussions get resolved and people get involved and invested in making something right, then you can't go wrong. Everybody's an open book. We wanted to get rid of all the egos, our interview process is really stringent. We wanted to make sure that we don't get anyone in here who's looking for glory or anybody here who wants to make a name for themselves; they just want to make good games. We've succeeded so far in getting people who are likeminded. It's just an awesome feeling."

"Only a handful of people in each department have even worked together before, but what you're seeing in this relatively short time-frame for what it is, a game that I think is pretty darn cool, with a team that hasn't really shipped anything yet," Bleszinski adds. "I think that starts from the top – Tramell, Arjan [Brussee, COO] and I, Chris Mielke [senior producer], we're just no bullshit. I always warn people before they come on board: the leaders of the company, they like to laugh but they're tough. And they're fair. Which I think is the best way to be."

LawBreakers is a game that's coming together fast, changing and evolving as the process continues. It started with a more cartoony art direction and has shifted to something a little more grown-up, "Going with more of a Quentin Tarantino type of sensibility as opposed to a Pixar one," as Bleszinski has described it. It's also shifted its release plan from free to play to a paid game, albeit not full price (no confirmed price point yet, just definitely not $60). There's a recognition from the team that it is making a multiplayer only game, but one where balance is essential and the necessity for microtransaction with the free model would have sent the game in the wrong direction.

What we play now is a tight, near symmetrical shooter with a diverse set of characters mirrored on either side (the 'Law' and 'Breakers' representing this game world's police and criminal elements) with an interested mix of low and zero-gravity effects in certain locations, power-ups, frantic battles for control and a pleasantly familiar vibe that harkens back to some classic arena shooters.

"We've managed to do a game with great movement that didn't go all crazy with the parkour animations – and I don't mean to knock parkour games – but in most shooters you're like a 40mph turret that's just going around 360," Bleszinski tells us. "But the feeling I get in my stomach when I soar through zero-G and I fire a gun behind me and skate on the tail-end of it, it has a bit of that classic *Quake/Tribes* vibe but hopefully for a new generation of players that expect hero, or anti-hero, games, so to speak."

"It has a bit of that classic Quake/ Tribes vibe but hopefully for a new generation of players"

Playing in the low-gravity environment of *LawBreakers*, which will feature in every map in some form or other, is a strange but exhilarating experience. When playing as the jetpack-propelled Vanguard class or given the ability to grappling hook around with the Assassin, your speed and manoeuvrability make you a force to be reckoned with. However, even the Enforcer and Tank classes, typically slower to get around, can propel themselves with blind fire behind them. It's a feature inspired in part by scenes from *Gravity*. Every class has its own role to play.

"When we play with each other – and we do play tests every day – my role is to get the battery and to get it across the map," Isaac says. "We've got two other guys who are just killing machines and they keep anybody from coming and chasing me and so on, or anyone coming into the battery room. Then we have other people who support, switching in and out with the Titan class or the Enforcer class and they'll just hold down that space."

The battery he mentions is the centre of *LawBreaker*'s Overcharge game mode, which we played on the Grand View map, a vision of a future Grand Canyon bought by foreign interests from the US government after a cataclysmic event that has in turn been messing with Earth's gravity. The world has recovered, but it is polarised and the sides fighting it out in the fiction of the game are a sign of this. Overcharge is *LawBreaker*'s take on capture the flag mixed with zone defence. In a bid to add drama to every game mode rather than simply offering the same old options because that's what FPS games always provide, this mode features one battery that must be taken to your base to charge. Once it hits 100 per cent you just need to defend it for 20 seconds. However, if it's taken by the opposition, it holds its charge. So you can lose it at 99 per cent and your opponent only need to defend it for a few seconds to win.

These creative evolutions of classic modes speak to the attention to detail this team is bringing. Every element of the game is tested and iterated upon. The team plays a new build three times a day to see how it's progressing. Even character design has been driven by gameplay first. Many of the characters were simply grey-box outlines tested in bare-bones maps before being given any art direction so that they played right before they looked right.

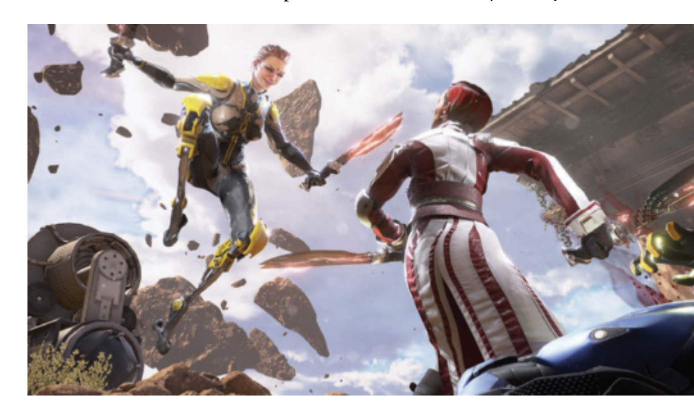
"We started with Chronos," Isaac reveals. "He was the very first character that we developed. And that's probably got the longest tail on it because it came first and it went through a bunch of changes. Once we got that down we still continued to develop him a little bit further. Maverick was the third or fourth on the list, but it seemed like the most interesting as far as the design language and the types of colours, the abilities built into the character.

"Once we got all of that stuff I gravitated towards that character because I really liked the design and all the tools that she had at her disposal."



Cliff Bleszinski has been making games professionally since he was 17 years old and had considered retirement before founding his new, mid-sized studio in North Carolina. *LawBreakers* is Boss Key Productions' first game.

LawBreakers makes use of a 360-degree battlefield and Assassins are particularly dangerous because of this. You actually need to keep an eye out for shadows being cast on the ground to make sure one isn't about to pounce on you.



This commitment to trying new ideas and only including things in the game that make it more fun has seen a lot of traditional gameplay types and classes fall away. "I remember we were trying to shoehorn a healer class into the game and it was mainly because 'Everybody's got a healer, we should have one too'," continues Isaac. "And right after we got done putting that in the closet and saying that's not going to work, we realised that we don't have to be like everybody else. We just have to make the game fun and make everything that we put in the game work for the health of the game. That's it. And as long as it's fun and it works, people are going to enjoy it. And if at any point in time we get feedback that we really need a healing class, then we'll resurface the one we put in mothballs."

Boss Key had hoped to be as open as possible with its development plans, but Bleszinski admits that hasn't been as easy as he had hoped with other ideas falling away and the team needing some time to find the right balance of features for *LawBreakers*. "We haven't been able to be as transparent as we wanted to," he says. "Just to go back to the original pitch for the game – 'Gangs, guns, gravity' – we'd always put everything against that: 'Does this leverage either of those three. But there was a fourth thing: 'grams of supplements', aka futuristic drugs. We had visions of players having this meta-game where they can mix different ones for their percentages, to affect their powers and things like that. But the more we thought about it, the more we thought that these three main pillars were enough, this is just going to be a fiction thing.

"And if we'd promised that to the players up front, they'd be all like 'But you prooomised! You suuuck!' Right? And that gets exponentially worse with a Kickstarter, because with the reality of game development, you *try* and predict it, you *try* to do your best and stick to a schedule, with the finances and what you have in the bank, but there's always something unpredictable. People get sick, people come and go; there's a lot you can't control. It's a miracle a game ever even ships. The moment we have the game potentially in some sort of pre-release, where we're considering a pre-alpha or anything like that, *that's* where we can pull back the curtain and really start to be a lot more transparent."



Overcharge mode is all about creating drama in the home bases as you try to stop the opposition from taking the battery back and stealing all of the progress you made in charging it up.

> "The FPS genre feels like for years it's been about the military fantasy, murder-boner thing"

The result is a game that while it harkens back to those arena shooters Bleszinski mentioned, like *Quake* or even *Unreal Tournament*, it also offers a fresh take on classic setups. The excitement was real as we reached the final moments of each match, frantically switching classes as we respawned to make sure we were best placed to support our team depending on whether we were attacking or defending. Unlike *Battleborn* or *Overwatch*, games this will undoubtedly be compared against, you don't necessarily need to stick with two or three characters out of a cast of dozens. You can master one or two for the scenario and that's fine. *LawBreakers* does however represent another FPS that's trying to shake off the last decade of the genre.

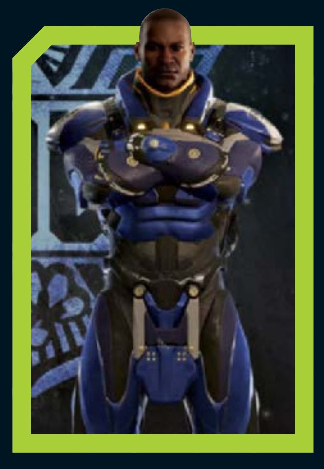
"The FPS genre feels like for years it's been about the military fantasy, murder-boner thing," says Bleszinski. "It feels like it's either split into that, or into Fisher Price, Pixar colours. I don't want to render an AR-15; there are plenty of games that do that great. And I don't want to render a Desert Eagle; I want to get back to playing with some fun sci-fi weapons that look pretty cool and realistic but that don't take up like a quarter of your screen or have that plasticky toy look to them. I'm really hoping and banking on the fact that there are a lot of players out there who play the military fantasy games or the super-bright colour ones, and they want something that's half-way between the two."

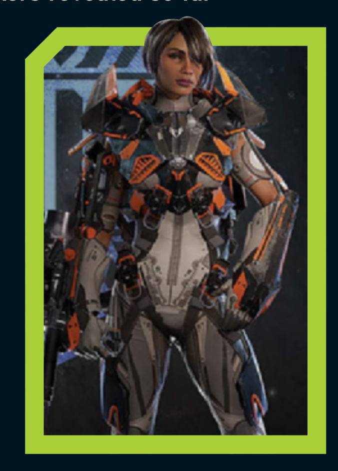
Right now his key ambition to simply to see the game out in the world, gaining fans and building up potential for updates and expansions. "[My ambition is] to get it out, but to get in a good cycle where the train is running and the game is a live product, where we have updates planned and staged and we're also managing the community expectations and the balance of the game. Continually looking at the next phase: 'What's the next phase?' 'A Mexican drug cartel shows up!' 'Yeah, and what's the next phase?' 'Robotic characters!' Something like that. Whatever, I'm pulling ideas out of my butt right now."

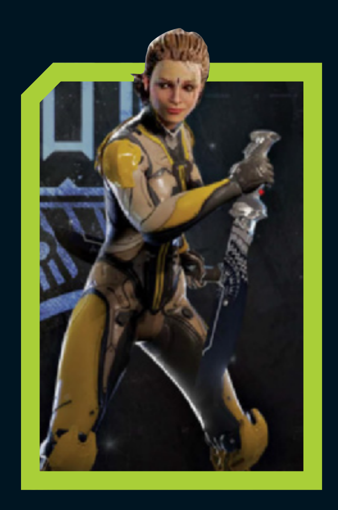
And what of the future of Boss Key? How much has Bleszinski thought on that? "We're at a fork right now," he tells us. "With the game coming out in a reasonable time-frame from now, hopefully when it's warm, if it becomes a huge thing we're going to have to staff up immensely. If it fizzles, we'll still iterate and support it, but it's one of those things where we'd have to consider a 'Project Two' at that point. You've got to keep the lights on, keep the families fed. The beauty of that is that I already have lots of game ideas floating around in my head, so I know plenty of what I want to do. Maybe play a little bit with VR. We'll see."

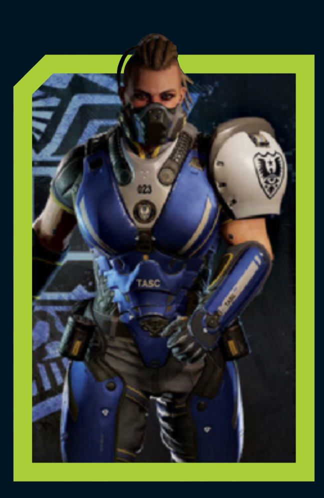
CLASS ACTION

The four classes of LawBreakers revealed so far









ENFORCER

More or less a classic soldier/warrior type with a solid assault rifle, good armour and moderate speed around the battlefield. For general defence and support purposes, the Enforcer is a great introduction to the game and can be dangerous when blind-firing, but needs to watch out against more vertically mobile opponents.

VANGUARD

Rogue might be the closest class staple to compare this to, but really the Vanguard is quite unique for *LawBreakers*. These heroes on either side can jetpack around the map with a limited, but recharging fuel-gauge. That gives this class a lot of speed, but also verticality, making it a 360 degree threat even with limited health.

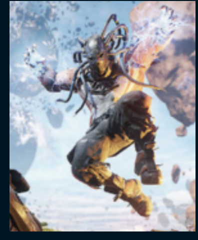
ASSASSIN

The weakest in terms of health, these nippy characters can use grappling hooks to whip their way around the map from above or below and as such are much more classically Rogue-like in their approach. Up close with blades the Assassins can take out even the toughest fighters and their anti-gravity grenades are mischievous.

TITAN

The classic Tank class, and a brick wall of defence when you're holding a battery in your base. The Titans have an electricity focus, with a supercharged ability letting you fire lightning bolts from your fingers. The secondary electric weapon also has an arcing splash damage effect on clustered enemies. Their standard rockets are pretty lethal, too.

Low-gravity zones like this one in the Grand View map are the centrepiece of *LawBreakers*. Vanguard and Assassin characters have the upper hand in terms of movement, but everyone else can still cause a lot of mayhem.



The Titans on both sides carry fearsome rocket launchers designed to look a little like sharks. They also feature a mid-air detonate function so that you can fire them with a left click and cause splash damage with a right click.



Bring the Noise

From 8-bit bleeps to orchestral bombast, video game composition is fast answering Hollywood's call



It may seem strange to think of videogames as anything other than an entertainment juggernaut, but when we talk about music, the industry is still very much in its infancy compared to its peers. Though increasingly spoiled with lush orchestration and complex sound design, the audio experience once typically associated with blockbusters is a comparatively new trend for games and one that shows no signs of stopping. Intricate sound design and music permeate every facet of the gaming experience and today a composer's role in games extends far beyond providing mere musical accompaniment.

Their work forges a vital emotional connection with stories and experiences that often continue to resonate long after the game is over. Take, for example, composer Gustavo Santaolalla's stirring score for *The Last Of Us*. "That's a great example of a great score that deepens your relationship with the characters and the storyline," muses Duncan Smith who, as senior music supervisor at Sony's London-based Creative Services Group, is responsible for overseeing many of the decisions pertaining to audio on a range of internal projects, including the likes of *DriveClub* and *Little Big Planet 3*.

"A game like *The Last Of Us* has upped the level of storytelling and dialogue and character development, so you get more emotionally involved with it. It's up there with the best Hollywood movie or art-house movie in terms of connecting you with it and I think the music needs to run in parallel with that. If the bar is going to be raised with everything else then the music needs to be as good as everything else to deepen it."

As head of music at Sony Entertainment Europe, Alastair Lindsay oversees the process of sourcing composers who will do just that. Liaising with development teams on budgets, managing composer schedules, and the overall process of implementing the score within the game itself, his role sees him working with Smith and the rest of the team to source the musical talent that's best suited for the job. "Nowadays there's no excuse for badly implemented audio," Lindsay says. "It's just your imagination and your ability to think at the beginning about how it's all going to work. You shouldn't have annoying repetitive cues here and there. There are a lot of clever things you can do to maximise the potential out of a small amount of assets, so you just have to think a bit harder."

"We're lucky that we've worked with some great composers in the past on lots of different projects who are people whose strengths are in different styles of music that we could go and call on again," Smith adds. "But, personally, we want the best composer for the job, so we won't ever just go back to someone because we've used them fifty times in the past… It's important that we reach out and try out new composers, especially if it's a style of music that maybe we haven't worked with before. Then it's important to go to people who do that music, who live and breathe it."

The stage at which a music supervisor may be engaged during development varies from project to project. This can be dictated by the size of a game, whether it is developed internally or by external studios, or how important the game's development team perceives music to be. "There's no point having a multi-million pound budget for a game and then, because you've saved money on music or not allocated enough or not valued it enough, you end up with music that can cheapen the whole experience," Smith states. "That kind of undermines the rest of the money and time and effort that's been put in to the game, by having



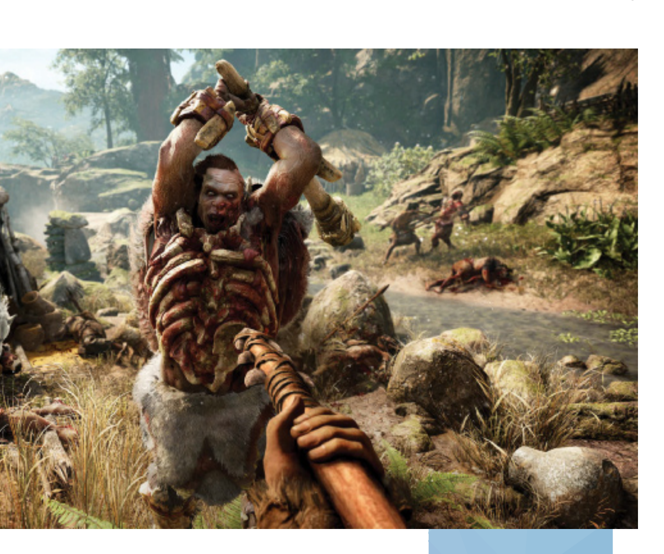
Graves utilises natural sounds and instrumentation to achieve an authentic sound for *Far Cry: Primal*, resulting in a bold and wildly unique soundtrack.



Sony Entertainment Europe's head of music Alastair Lindsay has worked in video games since 1993 and oversees all aspects of music production.

"Nowadays there's no excuse for badly implemented audio"

ALASTAIR LINDSAY



As games become more expansive and movement is more free, audio design needs to be adaptable and move with the player.

Dystopian sounds of the future

Steve Szczepkowski, executive audio director at Eidos Montreal, reflects on re-teaming with composer Michael McCann on the sci-fi stylings of the upcoming *Deus Ex: Mankind Divided*


Szczepkowski's work as executive audio director sees him working on all aspects of the *Deus Ex* series' sound design, closely collaborating with composers in the process.

"We were conscious of trying not to simply make it *Deus Ex: Human Revolution 2.0*," Szczepkowski recalls. "The creative angle of the game has changed – story, art direction, setting, and characters – so it was important for us to build upon the strong foundation, but also to let it stand on its own."

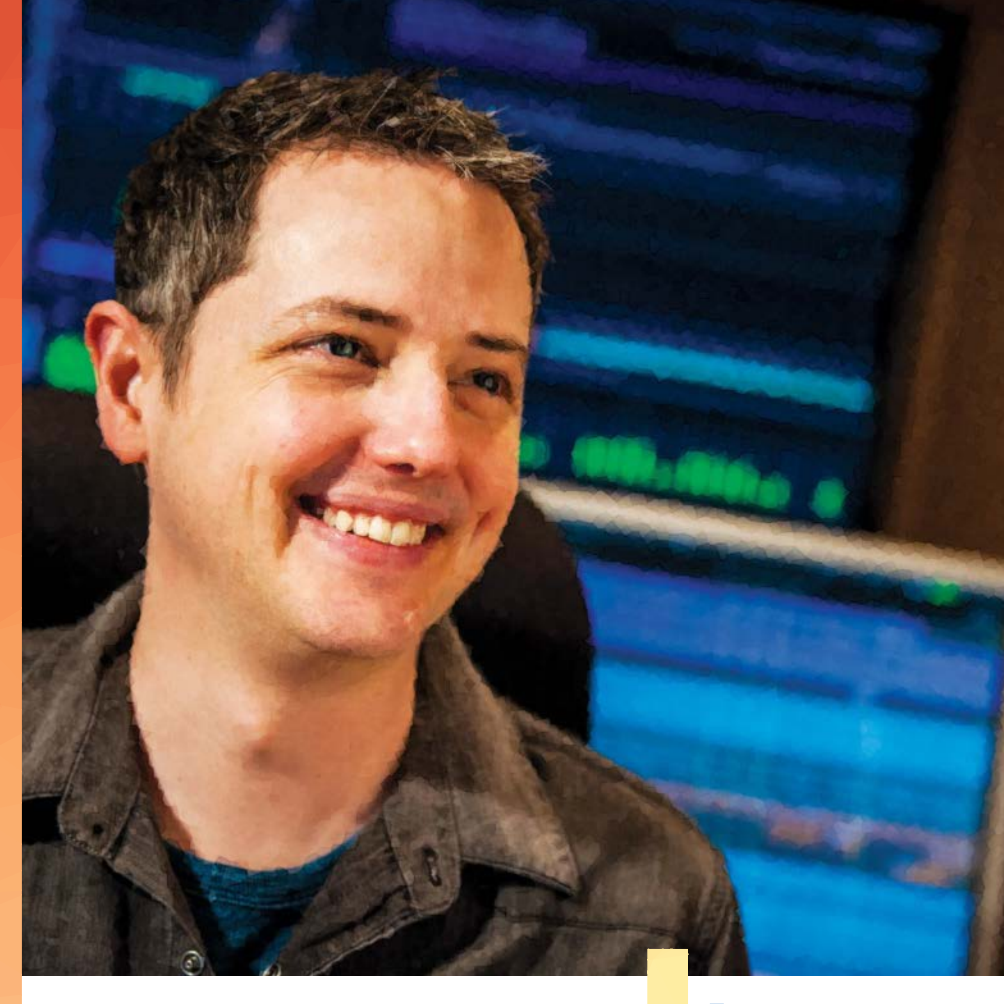
Having defined the synth soundscapes behind *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, composer Michael McCann set about expanding on his previous work. As with Zur and Graves' work on *Fallout 4* and *Far Cry Primal* respectively, musical interactions in *Mankind Divided* are dictated by the game's systems, responding to in-game actions rather than predetermined cues.

"We took the elements that worked well in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, and tried to expand on them," Szczepkowski adds. "We've created a music system that works hand in hand with the AI. The music will adapt subtly to all gameplay changes. For example, if the guards hear a disturbance, they will go and investigate – with the music changing subtly to support this."

As audio director, Szczepkowski provided reference material that would serve as inspiration for McCann and fellow composer Sascha Dikiciyan, best known for his work on *Tron: Evolution*, who was brought in to provide support as *Mankind Divided* rapidly expanded in scope during production.

"I want to give the composer whatever they need to succeed, ensuring they can capture the atmosphere and enhance what the dev team is working on," he explains. "Concept art, along with gameplay video footage, starts us off. From there, it's many phone calls. We talk and then exchange notes and ideas of what is working and what needs adjusting."

From these reference points, McCann and Dikiciyan worked on individual segments of the game, engaging Szczepkowski and the audio team along the way to assess how their work would best complement and enhance the overall tone and atmosphere of the game. "Generally, I advise the composer not to take the track too far without sharing it with me. It's innate with creatives to not want to show something until it's completely finished, but that can be very dangerous in this context if a composer becomes attached to a particular piece but the direction has travelled too far in the wrong direction. So we do a spot check before the composer heads too far down the road alone. This ensures that we're both on the same page."



» some ill-thought out or cheap-sounding music. It's when it's not done properly that you realise how important music is. It's always good if you have a producer who understands the power of music and how important it can be to get it right and to assign enough money and time to get it done right."



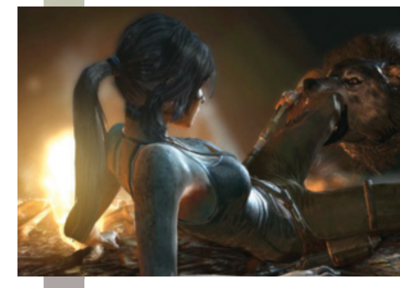
Away from Sony, in the case of composer Inon Zur, the task of scoring *Fallout 4* for Bethesda was underpinned by years of prior experience working on the likes of *Fallout 3* and its turn-based precursor, *Fallout Tactics*. The latter was developed long before Bethesda acquired the rights to the series and Zur's familiarity with the franchise provided a springboard for him to hone a distinctive sound that players would come to associate with the franchise. "I'd already planted the seeds for *Fallout 3* in *Fallout Tactics*," Zur recalls. "If you listen to the soundtrack it doesn't have any thematic ideas, it's more like sound design stuff. But unlike *Fallout 1* and *2*, I started to bring on board more of an organic sound design, which became the signature of the *Fallout* soundtracks and this was basically what differed *Fallout Tactics* from its predecessors."

Zur developed *Fallout 3*'s soundtrack over the course of just three months, creating no more than three iterations of the game's main theme before settling on the final piece. For *Fallout 4*, he was able to experiment further, beginning work on the game in 2013, almost two years before its release. During this time, Zur worked closely with audio director Mark Lampert and producer Todd Howard on crafting a sound that would serve as a tonal palette for the game as a whole.

Composer Jason Graves is best known for his pioneering work on the *Dead Space* franchise as well as the likes of *Tomb Raider* and *Until Dawn*.







"You're basically creating your own story within the score"

INON ZUR

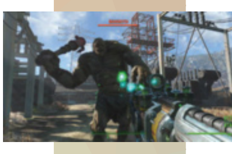


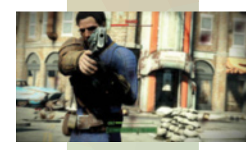
Composer Inon Zur has worked on the *Fallout* franchise since 2001, honing the series' distinctive sound across *Fallout 3*, *New Vegas* and *Fallout 4*.

"Bethesda allowed me to do a total free composition and the descriptions that I received were nothing even close to a storyboard," Zur adds. "I didn't know anything about the story. I was given emotional descriptions and this was the only guide that I had. Maybe some locations and then emotional aspects, and that's it. So the composition, so to speak, is part of the colouring tool inside the game. It's not playing against the picture. It doesn't play with the picture. It is there, basically, as a separate layer that is doing its own thing with the game." The open-ended nature of a game such as *Fallout 4* adds to the complexity of the scoring process given the non-linear way in which a player may interact with the world. As a result, the game employs a complex series of systems that dictate the way in which music might be heard, depending on the player's actions within the game world and the actions they are engaging in.

"Instead of trying to address and predict what the player is about to do, or will do and then respond to it, you're basically creating your own story within the score," Zur explains. "This way, you address more of the emotional aspects of the player, rather than the actual reality of what's going on in the game. So all you have to know is that at this point in the story this and this is happening, so the music should play this way according to the emotional state."

In contrast to Zur's work with Bethesda, the creative process behind composer Jason Graves' work on *Far Cry Primal* took place over a short, intensive period. With credits including the *Dead Space* franchise, Crystal Dynamics' *Tomb Raider* reboot and extensive work with Sony on the likes of *The Order* and *Until Dawn*, Graves' creative pedigree made him a strong fit for the team at Ubisoft Montreal. His involvement began in March 2015, by which point the game had expanded beyond what the creative team had envisaged.







Inon Zur won the Hollywood Music In Media award for best original song with *I Am The One* in *Dragon Age: Origins*.

"Most big titles really do, fortunately nowadays, bring composers in a lot earlier," Graves explains. "But what's nice is they had so many things already in place and with this kind of score the music and the instruments are so non-traditional that I feel I honestly would have just drowned in uncertainty if I'd been brought in two years before the game came out. I didn't have a lot of time to second-guess myself."



ver the course of six months, Graves took inspiration from the game's unique Stone Age setting, crafting a score that employed organic sounds from the time period. "Looking at the gameplay, I just didn't feel like it needed big sweeping melodies or even little tiny motifs of music to hook you here and there," he recalls. "The game wasn't really in shape yet, so in order to sort of tread water, I decided that I would focus more on the three tribes in the game. I'd already limited myself to basically drums, flutes, stones, bones, ceramic. There's no metal. There's nothing modern in the score except for the recording instruments, so I wanted to kind of parse it down even more and give each tribe its own sound and its own voice. I ended up doing about 20–25 minutes of music a week and sending these cues out. There was nothing but embarrassingly glowing feedback from Ubisoft."

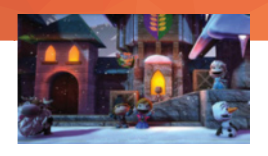
Perhaps one of the biggest draws for any composer is the scope for experimentation afforded by games, which sets them apart from the likes of film and television where various levels of seniority may wade in on the work in question. This still happens in games, but Zur explains that this is often far less invasive. "The whole political involvement inside even a very large scope game is not nearly as robust as TV or movies," he states, reflecting on his work in Hollywood. "I remember that at some point there were seven producers from different companies sat here behind my back while I'm composing and everybody wanted to wade in. In computer games it's just not the case. It's usually the main producer, director and audio director and that's it."

For the team at Sony's Creative Services Group, decisions on how best to implement music within a game will »

> “It’s when it’s not done properly that you realise how important music is”
> **DUNCAN SMITH**



Duncan Smith has worked for Sony Entertainment Europe since 2007, working on titles including *DriveClub*, *Gran Turismo* and *LittleBigPlanet 3*.

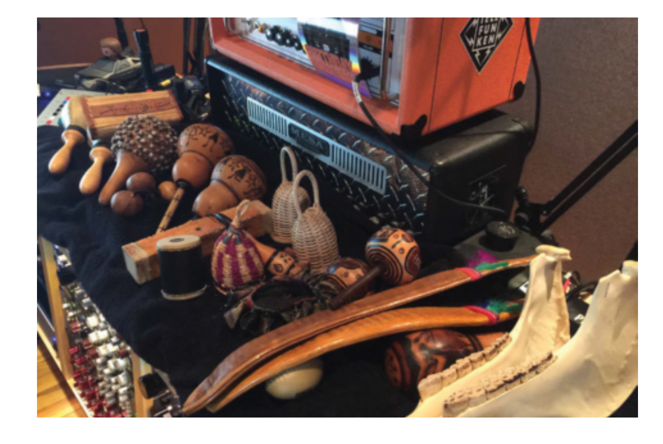


» generally fall to a small group of people, with the composer developing pieces that will then be reviewed and fed back on internally. “Too many cooks can definitely spoil the broth,” Smith concurs. “There’s usually an education process involved, but as a music supervisor if it can be myself and the producer of the game or the audio director, whoever has the authority and keep it down to two, maybe three people. What you don’t want is the whole art team being invited in to a room to listen to music that’s come in over the last week and have everyone feeling as though they ought to have an opinion, because it’s such a subjective thing.”



With game music increasingly growing in stature, changing attitudes in the music industry have better positioned audio teams to recruit musical talent. The resurgent popularity of vinyl has played a part in this, giving game soundtracks lives of their own beyond the games themselves, whilst simultaneously promoting composers’ work to an audience that may have otherwise overlooked it altogether. Meanwhile, record labels can benefit from cross-selling, with the inclusion of their artists’ pre-existing work in the likes of *Gran Turismo* and *DriveClub*, which in turn raises the profile of their artists.





Drums, flutes, stones, bones and ceramic all define *Far Cry Primal*’s fittingly bombastic score.

“When I started here, one of my challenges was educating the music industry as to the importance of video games and the value that we can add to their music by having their music featured in a game,” Smith explains. “The people that I deal with today are far more respectful towards the games industry and are aware of the importance of getting music in there in terms of discovery for new bands or for old bands and as a revenue stream, but more importantly as a way of connecting with people.”

For Lindsay, the increased awareness of music’s importance in games, both from a consumer and an industry perspective, has been crucial in paving the way to push boundaries and create work that continues to enhance the experience for players. It seems to be finally getting the support it deserves. “I don’t see any sort of technical limitations,” he states. “We kind of feel like we’re there and we have the skills, so that’s more of an interesting challenge to build upon those. It’s become a cheapened commodity and really bringing that back in focus, you get a lot of value out of some good music. But it’s a two-way thing, making sure there’s enough time to get the right music and to work with the right people so you get the best soundtrack, rather than just leaving it until the end. Getting people to appreciate that and be respectful and value what we’re trying to do for video games is important.”

MASTER OF ORION: CONQUER THE STARS

HOW WARGAMING HOPES TO BRING 4X GAMING BACK TO THE FUTURE





HERE ARE SOME games that attract players in their tens of millions and, upon release, have people queuing outside a starkly-lit supermarket at some ungodly morning hour. Third-person shooters can have this effect; football games, too. But strategy games tend to split opinion and have one set of gamers flocking in droves and another dropping their keyboard and dashing in the opposite direction as fast as that guy in *Canabalt*.

Wargaming – best known for *World Of Tanks* – is hoping to change some minds. It is taking an old game – the 1993 turn-based sci-fi strategy title *Master Of Orion* – and it is updating it to better suit 21st Century tastes. In doing so, Wargaming wants to open up the 4X genre to many more gamers. "We have to aim for a new audience to be successful," Chris Keeling, Wargaming's director of product vision, tells us.

When *Master Of Orion* arrived 23 years ago, it helped to lay the foundations of modern strategy games. Created for the PC and Mac back in the era of the Sega Mega Drive, SNES, and playground disk-swapping, it became a much-loved gem that grew to be affectionately dubbed "Civilisation in space". Gamers would visit randomly-generated planetary systems and stars, colonise planets, deal with different alien races and seek to bring a large population under their wing.

Among its many fans was Victor Kislyi who, five years after *Master Of Orion*'s release, went on to found Wargaming in Minsk, Belarus, specialising in multiplayer strategy games. The game's iconic 4X gameplay of "eXplore, eXpand, eXploit and eXterminate" affected him in more ways than one. "He considers the 4X genre to be his MBA in games, as he learned how to manage resources, conduct diplomacy, and expand aggressively," says Keeling. "These are the skills he later used to make Wargaming a successful company."

Kislyi loved the game so much that he stepped forward in 2013 and snapped up the rights from Atari's bankruptcy proceedings. "Once it came available from Atari, he pretty much demanded that we get it," Keeling adds. Up until that point the franchise had been in danger of being lost to the

ravages of time. There had been no sequel since 2003 (and the less said about *Master Of Orion III* the better) but suddenly there was a chance of giving it a fresh lease of life.

REACH FOR THE STARS

Rather than make the fourth iteration something entirely new, Wargaming announced in 2015 that the debut game would be "reimagined" or, as Keeling says, "rebooted". As such, *Master Of Orion: Conquer The Stars*, has been developed by Argentina-based NGD Studios in consultation with some of the people who worked on the original game. Although it now boasts a new orchestral soundtrack and swish graphics, the aim has been to be as faithful to the debut game as possible while appealing to those who have never played it before.

This is important, says Keeling, given that there are only "somewhere around half a million" global gamers in the hardcore 4X space strategy community. While this group is vocal and loyal to the genre, the numbers would be too small to make the project viable for Wargaming (which counts its customers in the tens of millions). "We want to bring this genre to players whose expectations of games are for more approachability, pleasing aesthetics, and who have no expectations of the game," Keeling tells us. "But we understand that we also have to do this while pleasing the core 4X game market. It's been a fine line to walk."

As such, *Master Of Orion: Conquer The Stars* has been built from the ground up, dropping the ability to travel to any in-range start system and leaving behind the turn-based combat mode, while retaining its infamous ship-designing feature and the ultimate aim of being the most popular race or the best conqueror and adding real-time tactical battling. In recreating the game, the developers have also been playing a lot of 4X titles, knowing that player expectations about what makes a great game in this genre have changed just as much as the technology has over the years.

"We've looked at every 4X space strategy game out there, each of which harkens back to the original *Master Of Orion* in its own way, as well as other 4X games," says Keeling. "We have to keep in mind that not only do we need to appeal to ourselves as hardcore fans, albeit with less time than we had back then, we also want the game to be successful among players who may never have heard of the originals."

Wargaming has also had to consider that, for many modern gamers, even the core concept of 4X can be just as alien as the races in *Orion*. Although Keeling makes a good argument for why gamers should pick up this new game – "We have an incredible amount of depth and immersion, strategic management, and approachable interfaces and mechanics that will let even the newest player engage with the genre" – he is more than aware that the very mention of 4X can be a barrier.

"While there are plenty of games out there based on reaction speed or that are casual for playing socially with friends, there just aren't a lot of true strategy games that allow you to build and manage an empire," he says. The task of getting new players involved is made more difficult by the decision not to make the game free to play, thereby encouraging the curious, but it does mean that there's no internal monetisation (something which has come as a great relief to the original fanbase).

Gamers can already see how all of this is shaping up, since *Master Of Orion: Conquer The Stars* is currently in an Early Access phase. One of the key things previous players will notice is that the ten races of the debut have resurfaced. There *is* an 11th – the Terran – which is only being made available in the »



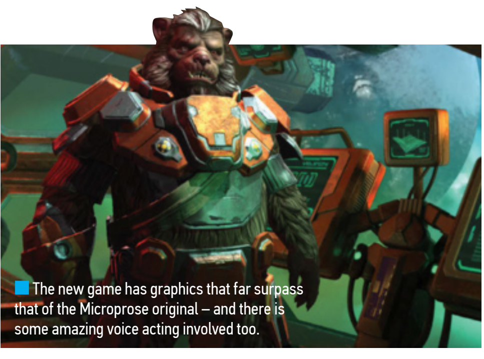
You are able to get the full stat lowdown on the planets that you visit.



By looking at the *Civilization*-like technology tree, you are able to see the consequences of your various actions.



The original debuted in 1993; as much as retro graphics are beloved these days, it clearly needs updating.



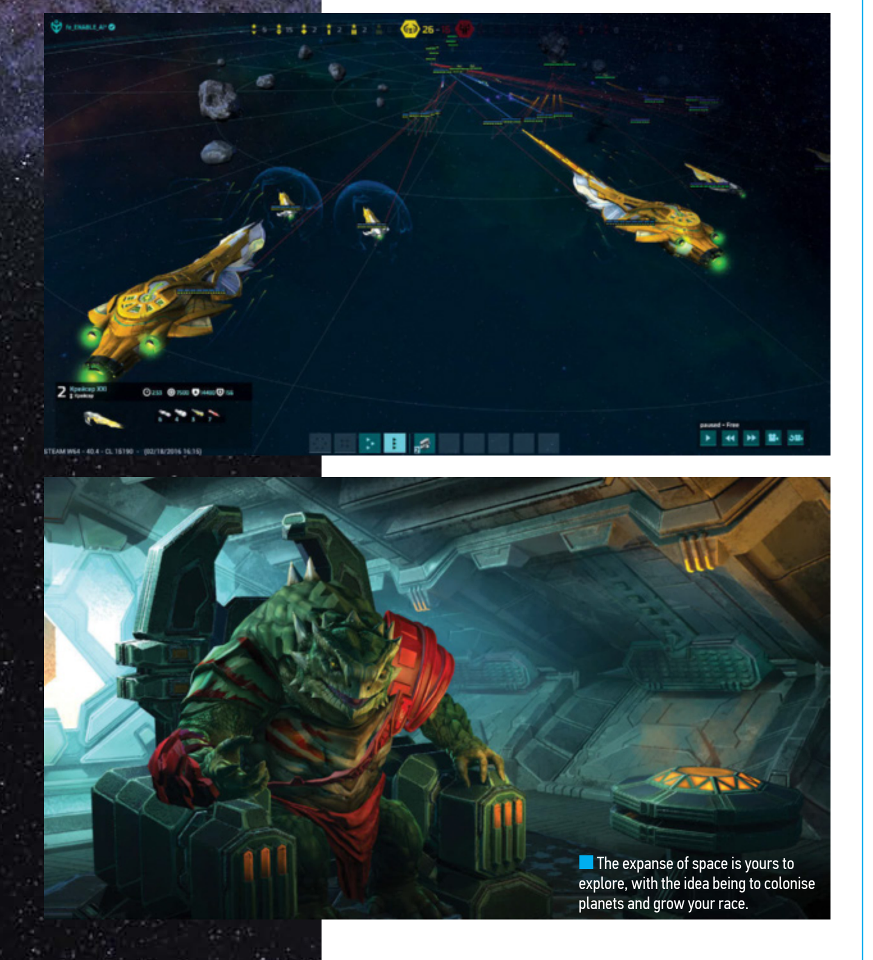
The new game has graphics that far surpass that of the Microprose original – and there is some amazing voice acting involved too.

Intelligence Design

Why AI is Master Of Orion's final hurdle

A lot of the development still left revolves around the game's artificial intelligence. Work began on the AI relatively late in the game's development. "We couldn't start making improvements until we had most of the features in," Keeling tells us. But one of the recent updates included improvements to behaviour in terms of diplomacy, colony management and expansion, with Wargaming pointing out that the AI was better at utilising ship upgrades including systems and weapons.

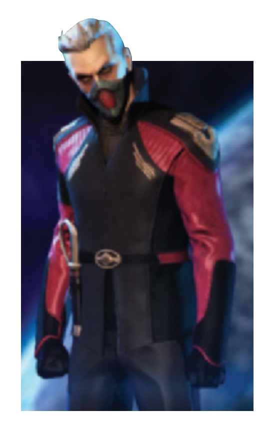
That said, some issues emerged in Early Access 3, which the developers sought to quickly fix. "It has been our primary emphasis during Early Access," Keeling continues. "We're going to continue to build on it as we continue toward launch and we also expect that there will be player mods that will create new AI possibilities after launch."



The expanse of space is yours to explore, with the idea being to colonise planets and grow your race.

Collector's Edition, but each race continues to have their own original speciality that affects the way in which they behave and influence a game. "We created a complete lore book based on the original games and ran it through our consultants from the original games," says Keeling. "We have tried to stay true to their lore, appearance, and personalities. The original story is part of what makes this game unique, so that is one of the things we decided up front we didn't want to change."

That said, the new systems have prompted some minor changes: the Silicoid still eat rocks, which means they don't need food and that has meant they have a different population growth algorithm. And because the old, unbalanced Creative perk isn't being used, the Psilons research 50 per cent faster in general. The advanced diplomacy system also means the Humans have perks regarding trade and treaties instead of just a relationship bonus.



Available in the Collector's Edition of the game, the violent Terran race is good at engineering and rose to power when humankind looked set to destroy itself. Its survival is everything.

KEEPING THE CORE

To make the game more approachable, it now incorporates a fresh user interface and tutorials. Many elements are also automated, which makes it easier for newcomers to be introduced but there is an even greater level of control for the hardcore, which lets players change the most intricate of components in the game, from production and population to tactical combat and research.

It all comes back to balance. "Players who want to micro-manage have plenty of opportunities to take control, while players who want only the high-level control can leverage the AI to help them with the details," Keeling says. So out has gone the "spreadsheet" style of play and in its place is something that is more fluid and intuitive.



At the same time, the fundamental differences in play between the debut game and this new version have been deliberately incremental than dramatic. "The core story of the first *Master Of Orion* has been kept intact, along with the original races and their primary traits," says Keeling. "We've used mechanics from all three original games as well as adding new ones, but our main focus has been keeping true to the 'just one more turn' feeling of the original games that kept you up playing all night."

Certainly, the main challenge of decision-making, balance, and focus remains. The "currency" of the game is still population, making expansion critical in the early stages of the game. "But not all races reproduce equally, so players have to leverage their race's particular perks to make up for any shortfall in growth. Production of the buildings that you need to grow and to get you on the path to victory is also essential," says Keeling, who adds that players need to lie, cheat and steal when they can. "That's politics everywhere," he adds.

But what of the issues that 4K games typically have with complexity in the late game? "Generally there have been two main problems with the late game in 4X games – the victory is assured, making the late game more of a clean-up than a challenge, and the player's empire becomes so huge that turns become very slow," Keeling answers. "For some players, this is actually fun, so of course we allow them to do that if they want to, but for the rest we have created several new victory conditions that give them an opportunity to win the game at their high point through technological, diplomatic, or economic domination, or to even set a turn limit to challenge themselves. This way they can finish up and start another game, in a new galaxy, with another race, heading toward a new kind of victory."

There is still work to do but the game looks set for a full launch later in the year. "Once we're finished with Early Access, we'll be ready to launch," Keeling says. "Of course, we will continue to support the game with patches and fixes after that as well." As it stands today, though, Wargaming is satisfied that all of the features are complete and that the game now only needs better balance, polish and AI. "It's a fun game," Keeling says. And we sense it's only going to get better.

THE SHIPPING YARD

THE CRAFTS OF MASTER OF ORION AND THE RACES THAT FLY THEM



SILICOID

An ancient race of silicon-based life forms, the Silicoids consume rocks and so have no need for organic food. They can live for a long period of time and colonise any planet.



MEKLAR

Tending to have a larger production potential than other races, the industrious Meklar are unpredictable yet capable of swiftly creating large fleets and strong infrastructures.



MRRSHAN

Having descended from hunting cats, the Mrrshans are similarly both stylish lovers of architecture and art, while being predatory and hot tempered.



DARLOK

These ruthless shapeshifters are able to sneakily transform themselves into almost any living creature, making them adept at scavenging and spying.



KLACKON

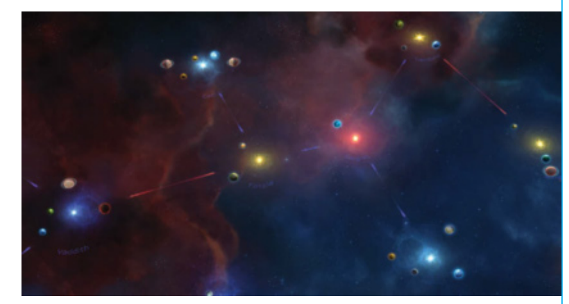
As well as looking like giant bugs, the Klackon display hive mind tendencies. Fearless and able to operate as a single unit, they work hard and construct well.



Wargaming has gone for an incremental approach to building on the original game in making the *Master Of Orion* reboot.

Some automation of commands has been added to help new players get to grips with what might otherwise be an intimidating micro-management system. More experienced players can deactivate this functionality, however.









PSILON

As one of the strongest and yet peaceful races, the Psilon are technologically advanced, able to achieve fast breakthroughs even when they are under pressure.



ALKARI

The Alkari descended from birds and have limited flight capabilities. Their piloting skills and propulsion technologies make them a great defensive race.



BULRATHI

A strong territorial race at the top of the tree when it comes to personal combat, it's a brave race that moves in on their patch. Their homeworld is rich in minerals.



HUMAN

Humans have been ever-present throughout the series, but with dwindling resources on Earth and a strong world government, they have mastered diplomacy.



SAKKRA

This imposing race despises the weaker races and displays an aggressive, brutish, competitive streak. They also reproduce at a prodigious rate.

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UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END

Naughty Dog looks to wrap up the epic adventures of Nathan Drake, but is it a game too far for the treasure hunter?



THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

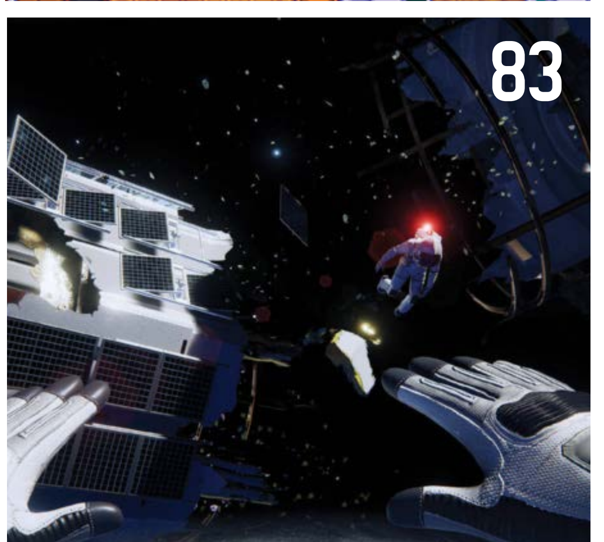












AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:







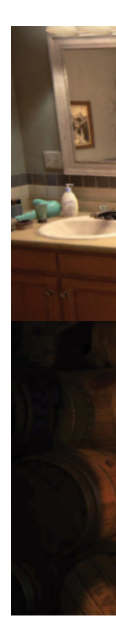
UNCHARTED 4 IS DRIVEN BY CHARACTER RATHER THAN PLOT AND THAT MEANS EVERYTHING FEEDS BACK INTO THE DEEPER DRAKE TALE

HEY, GOOD LOOKING

This is the new benchmark by which games should be judged this generation. It's not just a question of graphical fidelity, which it obviously excels at, but also its use of lighting, camera positioning and movement to highlight the amazing vistas that have been created, the textures and interactivity on show. Naughty Dog has a great cinematic eye for detail and likes to show off its creations with camera pans and zoom-outs. There's a slight difference between the cutscenes and gameplay in terms of character detail, but those classic *Uncharted* touches of Drake interacting with the environment and hobbling when he's injured remain. The only issue we saw during review was a little unevenness when moving through crowds. Beyond that, *Uncharted 4* seemed flawless to us.



Once we rejoin Drake in his present state, we find him largely contended, but clearly a little restless. It's a theme that will chase him through the rest of the game, challenging his rationale for taking on one last quest.





ALL GOOD THINGS

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

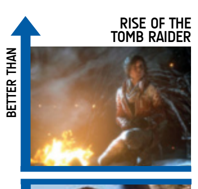
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Naughty Dog
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-10 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: Nate's foes this time are as ruthless and determined as any he has faced before, but as ever they are not really so different from him in their motivations and methods. It's a classic race to the treasure from start to end.

BETTER THAN

RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER



AS GOOD AS



UNCHARTED 3: DRAKE'S DECEPTION



Left: The game engine is at its very best in low light with focused, intense illumination like this cellar scene from early in the game. The way *Uncharted 4* captures shadows and light in real time can have breathtaking results.

Naughty Dog is simply better at this than anyone else. When it comes to marrying narrative and gameplay, creating an interactive adventure where you can be both participant and audience, agent of events in the game and spectator of the drama, this developer is ahead of all others. It gets the balance right again and again, and *Uncharted 4* is one of its best examples of that.

We'll say right out of the gate that this isn't quite on *Uncharted 2*'s level in terms of action and mind-blowing setpieces, but on the other hand it gives *The Last Of Us* a run for its money in the gripping story stakes. Don't get us wrong, Drake hasn't hung up his holster or given up leaping off collapsing buildings, it's just that this game feels like it was written with story beats and character development at its heart rather than a series of big, showcase events that needed to be squeezed in. *Uncharted 4* is driven by character rather than plot in other words and that means everything feeds back into the deeper Drake tale. If one lesson was taken from *The Last Of Us*, it was that grounding the story in the human relationships can be just as potent as derailing a train. Everything just matters more than it has before.

This struck us the deeper we went in to the game as we realised that the ultimate goal and treasure of *A Thief's End* was becoming less and less important to us and the ultimate fate of these characters and their relationships grew in stature. We've always liked Nate, Sully and Elena with their quippy banter and occasionally heartfelt confessions to one another, but *Uncharted 4* made us really care about them. You get given an insight into their true natures and why they've stuck together for so many years, despite Nathan Drake being a mess of conflicting motivations and desires. It all gets played out on the screen and, of course, this being Naughty Dog, played out in smart, subtle performances from the cast, intelligent writing and with plenty of exciting gameplay moments in-between. The introductions of a handful of player-dictated conversation trees keeps you engaged, although we didn't notice too much difference from outcomes based on what was chosen.

The big action moments are not quite on *Uncharted 2* levels and unfortunately that's really a problem Naughty Dog created for itself. That game was on another level in terms of structure and plotting and it's been smart to offer something tonally different and emotionally more engaging this time around. If you can't match the feats of the past, aim for a different peak. There's a good amount of leaping and running (a couple of fantastic chases that match the best escapes of these series), but the spectacle is spread over the game a little more evenly than before.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EVERYTHING HAS A REASON: It feels at times as if the adventure is an excuse to explore and develop these characters rather than the characters being an excuse for an adventure. It's a subtle turnaround, but potent.

That spectacle comes from incredibly rendered landscapes that are fully explorable, from insanely detailed buildings and ruins that only seem to get more and more breathtaking as the game progresses. While the opening couple of hours of the game are a little slow, the pacing of the rest of the adventure is consistently excellent, with less of the peaks and troughs of previous games. Again and again the game shifts emphasis from fighting to puzzles and climbing to exploration, interspersed with cinematics to let you have a breather.

Everything about *Uncharted 4* feels more grounded even while it still plays in the heightened pulp reality of an adventure serial and that even extends to the new mechanics and gameplay emphasis in *Uncharted 4*. The introduction of the grappling hook, for instance, makes for some greater variation in world traversal, freshening up that experience, while also allowing for more vertical encounters with enemies. Swinging around the landscape has plenty of escapist fantasy about it, but it also opens up the maps wonderfully and Naughty Dog has taken full advantage of that. These are real playgrounds to explore and should offer a healthy challenge to completionists who

need to find every treasure and jot down every possible journal entry. There is just so much to see and find. On top of this there's a much heavier emphasis on stealth.

Again we wonder how much influence *The Last Of Us* had here, but while resource management isn't really an issue for Drake, he is and should be pretty vulnerable when faced with an army and as such this game encourages a more thoughtful approach. Direct attack is possible, but risky, while using tall grass, hiding in cover and picking your moments to move around a location to pick off enemies is very satisfying. We should also give a shout out to the companion AI design team who managed to make this much more believable than in *The Last Of Us* as Sam and others keep well out of sight rather than running around in clear view all the time.

Now, being faced with ten enemies feels like a puzzle to be solved rather than just a firefight and while that means things take a little longer, they also offer a nice mental challenge on top of all the marksmanship. And frankly *Uncharted* has never been at its best as a shooter. The mechanics are just a little too loose, the guns a little light and characterless. The introduction of a colour scheme to gun pickups that identifies better weapons helps a little here, but we enjoyed the stealth too much. Things descending into a shootout felt like failure, not unlike playing *Metal Gear Solid*.

But there are of course real puzzles and these are some of the most fun and interactive of the series to date, although really not the most challenging. Perhaps it speaks to Naughty Dog wanting to keep the game moving at a nippy pace (and after the opening, once the adventure starts proper it does whizz along), but rather we think we've been spoiled again by recent fare. In the face of *The Witness*, *Uncharted*'s approach to puzzles almost seems a little quaint. We did like one moment though, which reminded us a lot of how we played *The Witness*, jotting down thoughts on a notepad as we went. It turns out Drake does something very similar when he's tackling a brain-teaser, so it's nice to know we at least have that in common.

The last really fresh addition is the jeep, which appears a little before midway through the game and is a rare example of a driving mechanic being added to an action game that doesn't suck. Getting the jeep through the world is fun, fast and offers up it's own smaller puzzles. Using the winch to get the jeep up hills for instance becomes a small and satisfying challenge with some interesting variations later in the game. The fact that it's designed physically, too, as you have to walk the cable around the anchor point before latching it in place, is really nice. There are so many canned animations in *Uncharted* for lifting heavy objects and opening doors, it's nice to have these little moments be player-controlled. The driving portions of the game stand out as some of the best in the game, and we're not just talking about the armoured vehicles chase from convention demos. Again and again it delivers some great opportunities and putting you behind the wheel only elevates that.

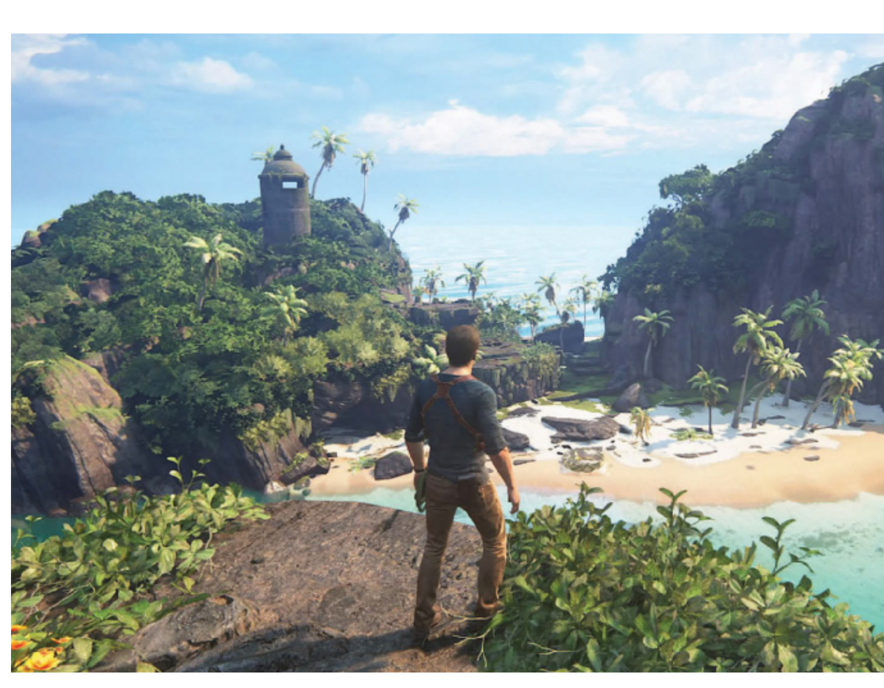
The new mechanics that have been added don't feel like back of the box fillers aimed at yelling 'New!' at you either. They feel pragmatic and intended to aid the story and elevate the feel of the game. Their introduction is justified through story beats and conversations. Sully and Drake argue about getting a car with a winch on it in the first

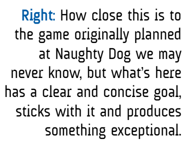
FAQs

Q. IS THIS REALLY THE END?
We wouldn't want to spoil anything by answering that.

Q. AS GOOD AS UNCHARTED 2?
In terms of setpiece spectacle and insanity? No. In terms of story and character? Yes.

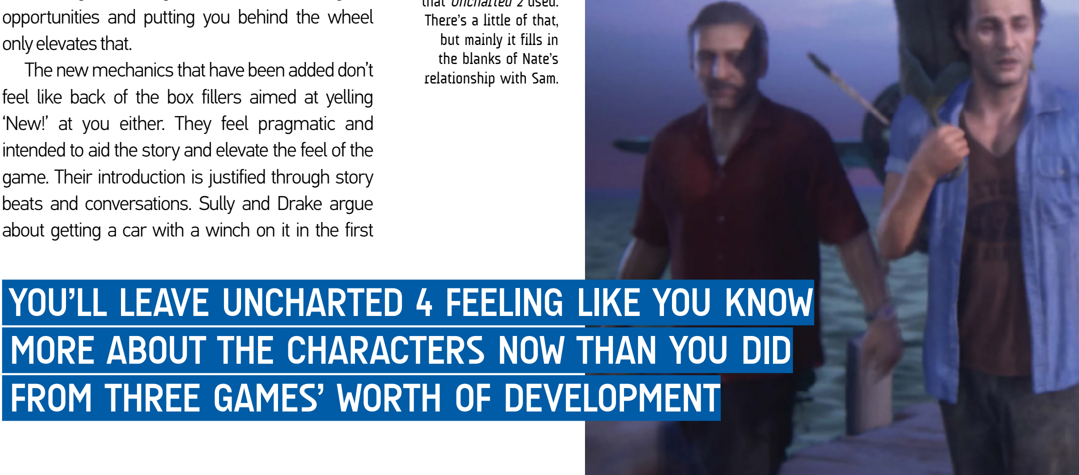
Q. LENGTHY STORY?
We completed our first play-through on normal difficulty in around 16 and a half hours, but there were plenty of treasures and journal entries still to find.





Right: How close this is to the game originally planned at Naughty Dog we may never know, but what's here has a clear and concise goal, sticks with it and produces something exceptional.





Right: The *Uncharted 4* story takes you back and forth through time, but not quite like the heavy narrative circle that *Uncharted 2* used. There's a little of that, but mainly it fills in the blanks of Nate's relationship with Sam.

YOU'LL LEAVE UNCHARTED 4 FEELING LIKE YOU KNOW MORE ABOUT THE CHARACTERS NOW THAN YOU DID FROM THREE GAMES' WORTH OF DEVELOPMENT



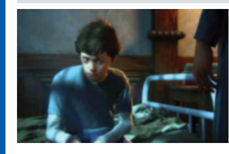
Below: You'll find plenty of Triangle tapping needs to be done as ever, but Naughty Dog uses that familiarity to good effect on a couple of occasions, diverting from your expectations.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

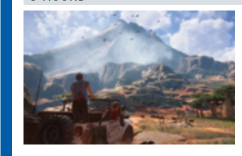
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINS



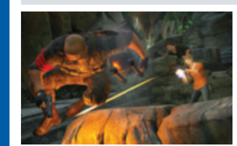
You get to take it slow to start with as the series reintroduces itself and fills in some blanks. We're not in *Uncharted 2* territory here.

6 HOURS



The action is intense, the puzzles interesting, but most importantly this story has us in its grasp. We have no idea where this is headed.

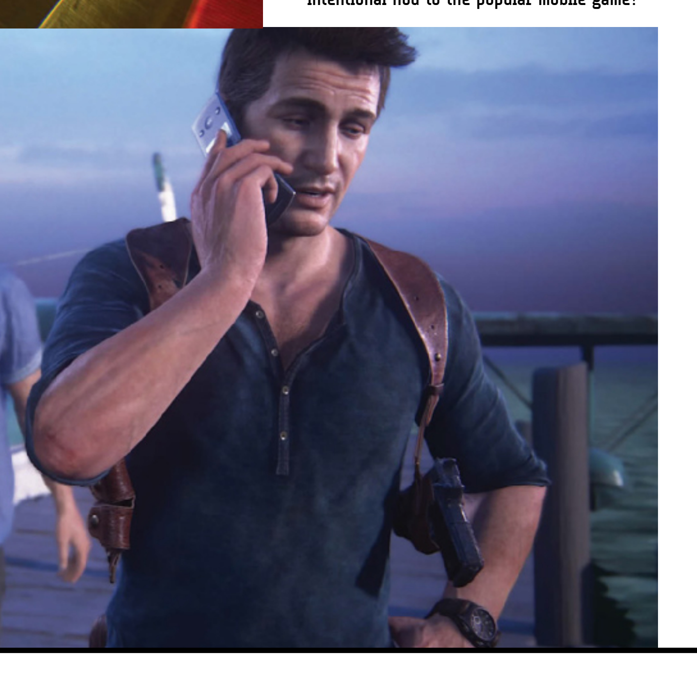
5 DAYS



Game complete bar some trinket hunting for return plays, we turn to face the rather insane multiplayer. Fun, but does it have a tail to it?

FLAPPY DRAKE

Uncharted has a bunch of small moments where it will ask you to employ a new control mechanic or repeat a particular action. Often, in the early part of the game you'll see these mechanics used as sneak peeks at things to come (which we won't spoil), but one in particular stuck with us, not least because we couldn't remember seeing it repeated later. It involves carrying crates underwater in a diving portion of the early stages of the game and the mechanic for keeping Drake afloat and not being pulled to the floor of the ocean can only be described as *Flappy Bird*-esque. You tap X to ascend and let it go to descend. An intentional nod to the popular mobile game?



place, Sam teases Nate about his throwing skills as he misses a grappling hook opportunity. Naughty Dog never misses a chance to give us an insight into these characters and you'll leave *Uncharted 4* feeling like you know more about them now than you did from three games' worth of development.

Tonally it ties in nicely to an overall sense of openness and inclusiveness that *Uncharted 4* radiates. There's always been an approachability about its characters and that's reflected in the narrative and gameplay mechanics now too. Case in point, as the game begins, you're invited to turn on and off various assists and aids for the game, such as an auto lock-on feature or assisted aiming to help the shooting areas become a little more manageable. Want a real challenge however and the tougher settings will give that to you. Plus the typically fun unlocks of skins and render modes are there to play with later if you want to.

In the fun stakes, the multiplayer for this edition of *Uncharted* deserves a lot of praise. It's not a heavyweight online experience and it's not trying to do anything that feels really groundbreaking or extraordinary, but it is fun. Respawns are fast, loadouts simple, and in-match power-up purchases easy to make. It's the flipside of the coin to this game's single-player where logic, physics and plot reign supreme, here it's insanity, totems that suck the life out of players and tight maps that keep things moving. The fact that you can unlock party hats for your character to wear tells you everything you need to know about what this section of the game is all about.

Playing before release, the thing that stands out above all else is the map design. Based upon stages from the story, every map offers interesting approaches, harnessing abilities like the grappling hook again, good vantage points for snipers and tight lanes of cover for shotgun users. There's some nice verticality to how Naughty Dog has approach this part of the experience too.

So, the combat can still feel a little loose and the setpieces aren't the biggest and most insane things this series has ever offered us, but the construction of it all is much more impressive than before. This is one of the best looking games we've ever had the pleasure to play, not just in terms of graphical fidelity, but scene composition, camera positioning and lighting too. This is a masterful piece of storytelling from Naughty Dog, packed full of wonderful and genuine character moments, great performances from the main cast and no small amount of little references for fans of both the series and developer. As a celebration of what Nathan Drake has given us over the last nine years we couldn't really have asked for too much more.

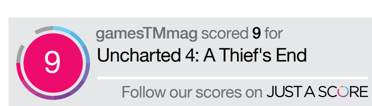
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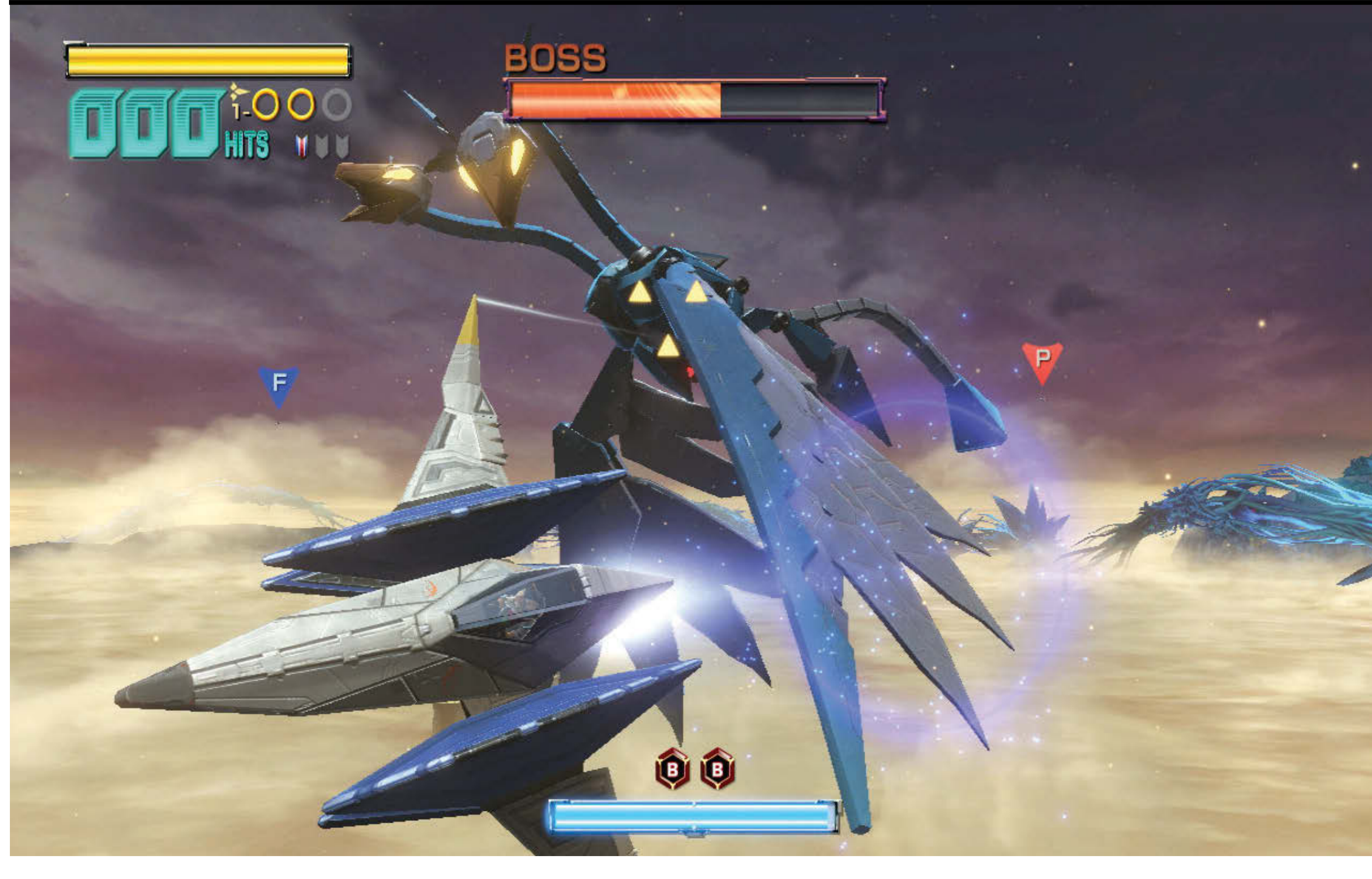
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FIST FIGHTER: We've been spoilt by the *Arkham* combat system, much imitated by action games, but *Uncharted* doesn't use it. As a result fistfights can feel a little uncoordinated.

VERDICT

BEAUTIFUL, JOYOUS AND THRILLING FROM START TO END





Above: Star Fox Zero may not be officially labelled as a direct sequel or remake to Star Fox 64, but it hits on many of the same action set pieces, story beats and dialogue cues. In essence, it's a stripped back HD remaster.

IF ONLY WE HAD LISTENED TO WOLF O'DONNELL

Star Fox Zero

You know what? We're going to have some fun here before we get into the nasty business of picking through the smouldering wreckage of this Arwing crash-site; the charred remains of Fox McCloud a testament to Nintendo's inability to properly utilise its own hardware, let alone take command of a franchise that's had more misadventures than recorded successes in its 23 years of galactic service. Here we go: the games that have made fantastic use of the Wii U's second screen capabilities, we want you to count them.

Okay, your time is up. Now please, share your findings with the rest of the class… Just as we suspected, you can count them on one hand. And *Star Fox Zero*, Nintendo's grand-collaboration with Platinum – made largely to justify this bizarre hardware venture's existence in the face of so much vitriol – isn't one of them. While this project may have taken off with the best of intentions, as a nostalgic flyby to the innocence of the N64-era, it quickly barrel-rolls into mediocrity.

That's down to *Star Fox Zero* suffering from an identity crisis of sorts, caught between its retro responsibilities and GamePad-defining ambitions. For all intents and purposes, there are large periods of time where *Zero* feels, looks and acts like the almighty *Star Fox 64* – albeit a version outfitted with a plush HD treatment and an intrusive control scheme to justify its existence in 2016. That isn't a happy accident, either. Nintendo and Platinum were surprisingly coy throughout development when it came to labelling *Zero* – leaving it stranded in a 'not a sequel, not a prequel, but not quite a reboot' no man's land of game promotion. But please allow us to be perfectly clear: had *Star Fox* fans not been subjected to a parade of brand-diminishing entries in the intervening years since 64's release, and had *Zero* arrived back in 2001 for the GameCube instead of Rare's *Star Fox-appropriated Adventures*, it would likely have been heralded as the perfect follow up to the seminal 1997 rail shooter.

You'll see that in it as you return to the surface of Corneria for the first time, your Arwing whipping over intentionally flat textures. You'll be whisked away to another time as you hear familiar voices barking all-too familiar commands – the original cast are all present and accounted for, returning to voice Peppy, Slippy, Fox and Falco. There's

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Platinum Games
PRICE: £44.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

STAR FOX ZERO IS A NOSTALGIC THROWBACK TO THE INNOCENCE OF THE N64 AGE

FAQs

Q. SHOULD I DUST OFF THE WII U?
Probably not, not for *Star Fox Zero* at least.

Q. HOW LONG IS THE GAME?
It will take about six hours to complete if you're eager to set some high scores, though it could be done in three.

Q. COULD THIS HAVE BEEN SAVED?
What development really needed was Wolf O'Donnell flying over the studios shouting, "I can't let you do that, Miyamoto."



Below: Many locations in Zero should be recognisable to franchise fans. In fact, the return visits to Corneria should give you the opportunity to indulge in a nostalgic smile, as fleeting as it may be.



Below: Were this released back on GameCube it would likely have hit all the right beats, but the industry has come so far since then that this feels too dated.

a star map that charts your journey; detours await the dedicated, and there are plenty of opportunities to return to conquered stages to set new scores and collect up medals. So far, so good, so *Star Fox 64*.

But therein lies the problem: it isn't 2001. The time has come and gone for such a stripped-back – and almost flippantly arrogant – follow-up to *64*. It's crushing to consider that what you thought you wanted all along wasn't what you wanted at all. This isn't the emotional reaction we were expecting to have with a *Star Fox* game, but while so many other retro revivals have kept up with the overall progression of the industry and made strides to update specific mechanics and systems, this feels stuck in the past. It doesn't matter how many nostalgic references, branching paths and meme-readied dialogue quips Platinum stuff into a game, it doesn't make up for lacklustre mission design and generally unspectacular moment-to-moment action.

None of this is helped by *Zero*'s haphazard reliance on utilising the GamePad. It was always going to be a divisive design decision, and it's one that ultimately feels forced. Whether you're blasting through a series of on-rail sequences or taking on foes in larger, open combat arenas, you'll need to do it by physically moving the GamePad around to aim your Arwing's reticule – all the while controlling the direction and speed of your craft with the analogue sticks. It's as awkward to use as it sounds. With the on-rail gauntlet sections, you'll find that the controls (while uncomfortable) are perfectly serviceable, though once the game begins demanding that you shift attention back and forth between the GamePad and your TV screen, all the while thrusting your arms around like a lunatic, then the whole concept falls apart.

On the plus side, there's a decent assortment of vehicles available too, such as the Landmaster from *64*, a Walker salvaged from the remains of the unreleased *Star Fox 2*, and an all-new Gyrocopter, but they handle woefully. If *Zero* occasionally demonstrates some of the highs that made us fall in love with *64* while in the air, it's the moments on the ground that truly deteriorate. This isn't solely on the awkward motion controls either, but some haphazard level and mission design that seems designed to irritate.

The problem with the motion control system is that there is never a moment where *Star Fox Zero* feels better because of its integration. Cockpit view controlled with gyroscopes is a neat idea, but it's been completely superseded by the arrival of VR. Here in reality, *Zero* isn't doing anything other space combat games haven't achieved for years now using far fewer inputs – not to mention far more effectively. But that's *Zero*, it lacks the focus or nuance that both Platinum and Nintendo usually deliver.

As fan service, it does a solid (if a little lazy) job of hitting all the right notes, it's fun in brief moments, but we've seen far too much of it before in previous games. True fans have been waiting so long for a proper sequel that it's hard to not walk away disappointed. If you only know Fox McCloud through *Super Smash Bros*, just let him live happily ever after as an awesome fighter character. He'd want it that way.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

COCKPIT CONTROL: Using the gyroscopes built into the Wii U GamePad you can aim the Arwing's weapons with motion. It's unique, but clunky.

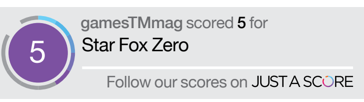
STAR FOX GUARD

In addition to *Star Fox Zero*, there's also *Star Fox Guard* bundled into the package. It's a strange little tower defence game, based on a Shigeru Miyamoto's proof-of-concept demos from E3 2014, and we get the feeling it should have stayed as just that. In it, you'll switch between 12 different cameras using the Wii U GamePad – to track and shoot robots as they storm your position. It's a fun diversion from the lacklustre main package, but it's a novelty that won't hold the attention for long. After an hour or so with *Guard*, you'll quickly see why Nintendo opted to release this for free, it again just highlights how badly even Nintendo's internal teams are struggling to realise the Wii U's unique control scheme.



VERDICT

CLOSURE ON A DIFFICULT CHAPTER IN NINTENDO'S HISTORY





Enemy Yo-Kai are randomly befriended after battles. You can increase the chances of this by throwing food at them. Different Yo-Kai like different types of food but even if they love it there's no real guarantee, making the whole system feel tenuous.

PINKIPOO, I CHOOSE YOU?

Yo-Kai Watch

It's impossible to talk about *Yo-Kai Watch* without addressing the Snorlax in the room. Much as Nintendo would go to great pains to stress that its latest Japanese export can co-exist with the *Pokémon* series, it's clear that for *Yo-Kai* to enjoy the same success in the west as it has in Japan it's going to have to draw attention away from fans of Pikachu and chums. Based on what's on offer here, that may be something of an uphill battle.

Players take on the role of a child who encounters Whisper, a Yo-Kai (ghost), who gives them a special watch. The watch lets you see and interact with other Yo-Kai, and also summon those you've befriended so they can take part in battles on your behalf. Somewhat disappointingly, there isn't much more to it than that: there's no greater purpose or larger overarching plot tying everything together.

Instead, your main task is essentially exploring your home town of Springdale and seeking out any Yo-Kai who are making life difficult for your fellow humans, before working out how to stop them. Before long the game starts to feel like a lengthy compendium of side missions, many of which are fetch quests, and you'll soon be craving something meatier along the lines of *Pokémon*'s perennial Elite Four or evil Team subplots.

There's a similar feeling of unfulfilled promise every time the battle system kicks in. Standard attacks are handled automatically, with your team of Yo-Kai performing moves without any input from you. Your tasks during battles include rotating your active squad members, recovering fallen Yo-Kai and activating special attacks. These are performed via quick and simple micro-games where you have to spin a wheel, pop bubbles and the like, with your success in them having an influence on your command's effectiveness. These get tiresome extremely quickly and never really make a notable visual impact on the fight, ultimately making you feel like a child at a dinner party who's been given a colouring book to keep them occupied while the grown-ups talk.

This lack of empowerment extends to the befriending mechanic, which is how to 'catch' Yo-Kai. Even though you can throw food at them to increase the odds of them joining you, it never really feels like you're making an impact.

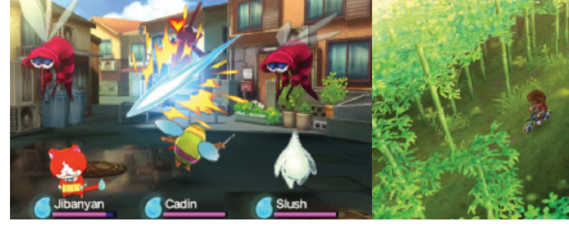
When *Yo-Kai Watch* does do things right, though, it does so to an impressive degree. The detailed town is fun to explore, the dialogue is witty and consistently funny, and the Yo-Kai designs are wonderful (not to mention brilliantly animated). There are just too many occasions where you'll feel like a spectator and, yes, wish you were playing *Pokémon* instead.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: FOSSIL FIGHTERS: FRONTIER

WORSE THAN: POKÉMON X & Y



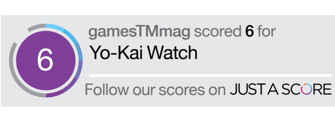
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

YO-KAI CAM: This interesting extra mode uses the 3DS camera. Take a photo of a friend and the game analyses their face and generates a Yo-Kai next to them. You have to collect different Yo-Kai for rewards.

VERDICT

FULL OF CHARM BUT NOT ENGAGING ENOUGH





MERCILESS GUNPLAY

Enter The Gungeon

***Enter The Gungeon* is the bastard spawn of a roguelike and an arcade shooter after a night of hard liquor and too many John Woo movies.** And what a glorious mashup it is – after selecting from a number of gun-toting tropes (hello, Marine, Convict, Pilot and more) you'd be lulled into thinking this is going to be another tongue-in-cheek throwaway that's more concerned with cultural references than actual gameplay, but from the off *Enter The Gungeon* throws you into its pixel art world in a hail of gunfire, death and glory. Make no mistake, *Enter The Gungeon* will punish you. It'll kick you straight in the unmentionables, slap you in the face and make you cry like a newborn. Thing is, it'll do all this and you'll love it because of how well it marries the bullet hell of an arcade shooter with the merciless action and procedural generation of a roguelike.

With only three hearts of life to your name and plenty of foes littered about each randomised map, you *will* die. But with plenty of weapons, tables that can be flipped for temporary cover, and a dodge roll that offers a split second of invincibility you have all you need to survive. In the vein of *Dark Souls*, *Titan Souls* and *The Binding Of Isaac*, the only thing stopping you from conquering each level of the Gungeon is you, and once you master the art of dodge rolling and aerobic gunfire you'll soon be dealing leapy death like a pixelated Chow Yun Fat.

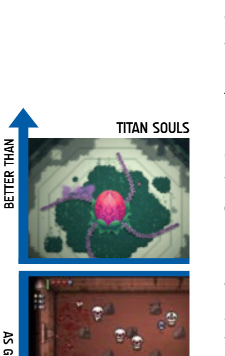
All those deaths won't have you traipsing back through the same rooms either. That procedural generation keeps everything fresh as treasure chests, bosses and rooms are completely randomised. Since progress is all about mastering technique over memorising level layouts you'll never feel victimised for having to start from scratch, although some runs are easier than others if you manage to luck out on the right loot. Randomly cycling the bosses (which range from giant twin bullets to a sentient wall) adds another fresh touch of refreshing punishment. However, if *Enter The Gungeon* falls down in one area, it's its armoury. Every gun is still fun to use, even down to the simplest of pistols, but there's a noticeable familiarity between many of them that makes switching between them less impactful than you'd hope for in an arcade shooter. Still, with all those map layouts and bosses to hunt down, you'll still spend hours in the Gungeon pushing yourself, with a stupid, maniacal grin on your face.



FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER: Dodge Roll
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TITAN SOULS



AS GOOD AS



THE BINDING OF ISAAC: REBIRTH

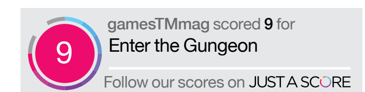
SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

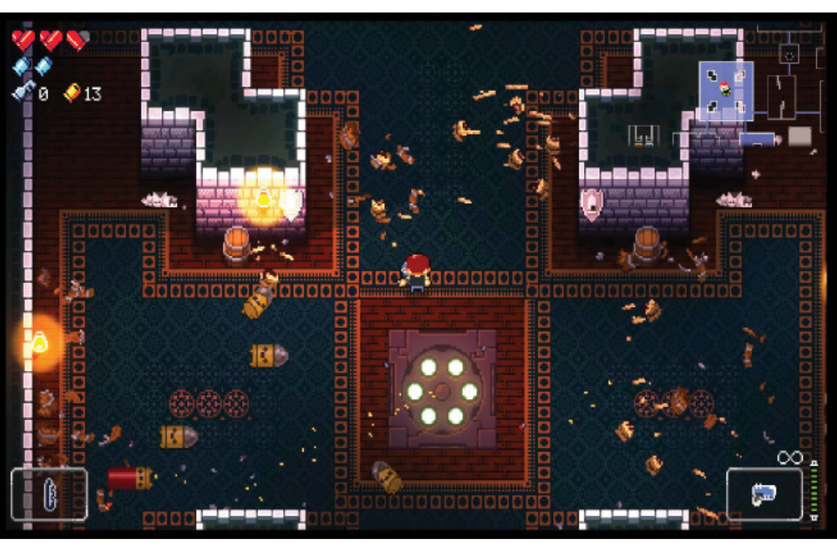
ROGUE HELL: The combination of an arcade, bullet hell shooter keeps every room fresh with acrobatic violence, while the procedural generation of a roguelike keeps each run new and exciting.

VERDICT

A PIXELATED SLICE OF BULLET HEAVEN







Above: Health pickups are rare, so learning to use cover – be it flipped tables or scenery – and making the most of your dodge roll is the key to not just surviving in *Enter The Gungeon*, but thriving.

BREAKING NEW GROUND

Stardew Valley

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Chucklefish Games
DEVELOPER: ConcernedApe
PRICE: £10.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2GHz, 2GB RAM, 500MB HDD space, 256MB VRAM
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Stardew Valley is a game about jobs – cool jobs you'll probably never have in real life. In fact, its entire premise is about escaping the monotony of the *dreaded desk job* and disappearing far away, to a decrepit farm left to you in your grandfather's inheritance. From there, it's up to you as owner to cultivate the land, forage, fish, mine for ore, and get to know the locals. It can feel a little aimless at first, but the leisurely pace quickly puts you at ease and you fall into a rhythm with whatever you enjoy doing. The tutorials are deliberately light, and instead of overloading you with information from get-go, *Stardew Valley* is far more interested in setting up the basics of farming and letting you discover the rest on your own.

The initial priority is to plant some crops; you receive a gift of 15 parsnip seeds from the mayor to get you started, and then it's a case of tilling the soil, planting the seeds and keeping them watered until they deliver the goods. The more you plant and harvest, the more money you can make by selling the vegetables, fruits and flowers they bare. Game saves occur only when you sleep to pass to the next day, and the game absolutely nails the 'one more day' compulsion that keeps you pushing on for an extra half-hour of playtime while you get those crops fully grown.

While you're not farming, you're free to explore the nearby town – check out the local shops, or venture north into the mines. Head south and you'll find the shorefront, where you can pick up your first fishing rod and learn to master one of *Stardew Valley*'s surprisingly subtle mini-games in order to become a master fisherman. There's always something to do, and the game never forces you to do things you don't enjoy – there's cooking to be done, townsfolk to meet, regular town events to attends – festivals, fetes – and an entire crafting system to tinker around with.

Everything you do leads to an improved proficiency in that field. You'll unlock better equipment to craft, and upgrade your tools so they're better suited to the jobs you're doing. Continue farming and you'll unlock the ability to craft sprinklers to keep your crops watered, and scarecrows to stop birds from spoiling your shrubs. You're never far from unlocking something cool; something that keeps you working each day to its fullest, but makes individual jobs less monotonous.

From Spring to Summer, to Fall and Winter, season changes will render certain crops dead. You have to plan ahead – farming doesn't even occur in winter – and your jobs remain engrossing day-in, day-out. That's *Stardew Valley*'s greatest strength – it gives you a load of interesting things to do in your new life, rewards you whichever you choose to do, and it always feels like more than just a farming game.

BETTER THAN: STARBOUND

AS GOOD AS: ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW LEAF

WORLDWIDE

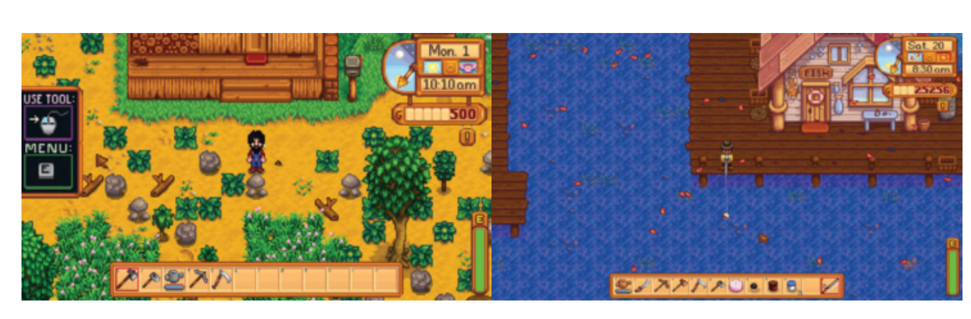
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

SHARE THE LOAD: The ability to venture into other people's worlds would open up trading options for unique items only you have in your farm. There's even the opportunity to share farms and their workload.



Above: You can lay your farm out exactly how you want to – have one big area filled with different crops, or separate areas using fencing and pathways. You can build silos for store goods, as well as crafting chests and furnaces.

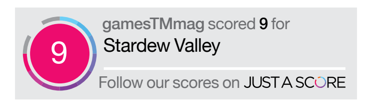




Above: When you first come to your farm, it's a mess that you have to tidy up. Hit the ground running and utilise the wood, grasses and rocks that litter the ground to collect enough useful resources to get you on your way to a profitable life.

VERDICT

REWARDING, ENGROSSING AND JUST DOWNRIGHT LOVELY



DRIVE, CRASH, REPEAT

TrackMania Turbo



DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Nadeo
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 (1-32 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

More racers should start with your car being dropped by a helicopter onto the track. It's a simple, visceral thrill that really sets the light and silly yet competitively intense tone of *TrackMania Turbo*. And this is a game with plenty of thrilling moments to it, it's just a shame that it can be interspersed with so much tedium.

The *TrackMania* series has been pushing arcade racing speed and insanity for over a decade, creating a hybrid of twitch control driving and near-rollercoaster levels of track design to make an experience unlike anything else. *TrackMania Turbo* continues that legacy and at its best, it is a real joy. Shimmying in and out of chicanes, leaping through rings, driving upside-down in first person at break-neck speed; it's pretty enjoyable.

But it's also unfortunately rather lightweight. There are some 200 tracks in the solo campaign mode, which is plenty, but they're all variations on the same four themes. We definitely enjoyed later tracks more than the earlier ones, as it all became more complex and challenging, but sometimes the game feels set up more to annoy and infuriate than reward. The focus on time trial racing is actually pretty welcome and works well in multiplayer with ghosts on the track, but not having anything else available leaves you wanting a lot more.

But let's get back to the annoyance for a moment. This is a pretty twitchy game, requiring small tweaks of the steering or else you start flying all over the place. *TrackMania Turbo* is horribly unforgiving at times as objects on the side of the track will send you spinning at the slightest contact and awkwardly-placed lampposts can ruin what might otherwise seem like a perfectly executed jump. It's a game where reloading from the start by hitting B (or Circle on PS4, of course) becomes second nature. There's an element of having to properly learn each track before you can really set a time on it, but races are over so fast, it rarely feels satisfying.

Which gets us to a small technical grievance. Many of the tracks in this game can take as little as 30 seconds to a minute to complete, which is fine and keeps things moving at a nice clip, but the loading screens between the tracks take even longer sometimes. The race and repeat flow of the game is horribly broken by this, which is a real shame. And ultimately it speaks to the slightly budget-level aspirations of this release. Ubisoft isn't exactly asking top dollar for *TrackMania Turbo*, which speaks to the decline of the action arcade racer in recent years. *TrackMania* could be so much more than this, but at least what's here still provides bursts of fun.

BETTER THAN

CARMAGEDDON: REINCARNATION





WORSE THAN

FORZA HORIZON 2

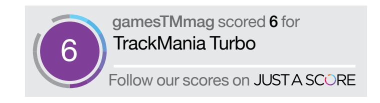
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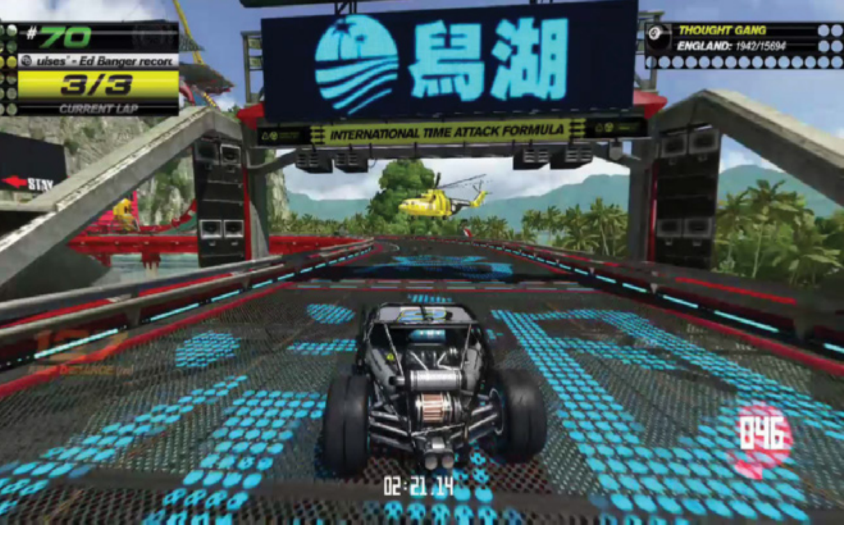
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

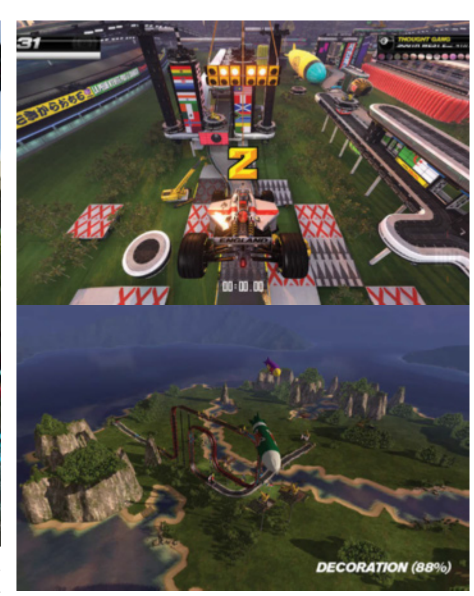
IN MODS WE TRUST: The track creation capabilities that *TrackMania Turbo* offers are simple to use, but finding a good community track is tough. You can search by style of track, but not by user rating, which means wading through a lot of rubbish.

VERDICT

IT'S GOT THE SPEED, BUT NOT THE FINESSE

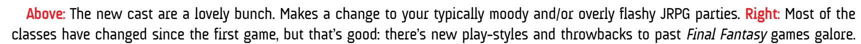


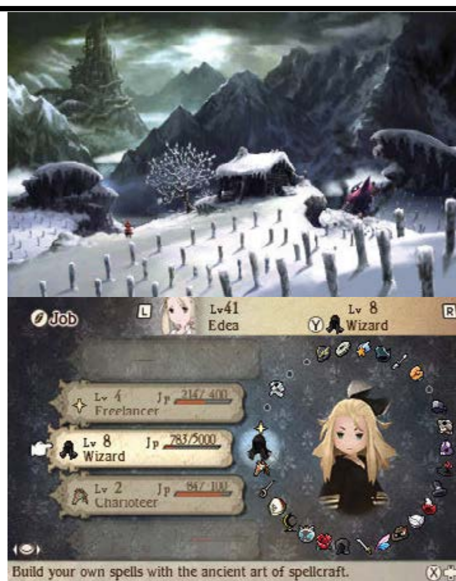




Above: Some of the details are a little rough around the edges, but it's certainly light and colourful enough to hold your interest.




Above: The new cast are a lovely bunch. Makes a change to your typically moody and/or overly flashy JRPG parties. **Right:** Most of the classes have changed since the first game, but that's good: there's new play-styles and throwbacks to past *Final Fantasy* games galore.



IT'S TIME TO BUST SOME BA'ALS

Bravely Second: End Layer

From an opening battle where your overpowered warriors are struck down in seconds to a strange encounter with a warrior maiden, *Bravely Second* does everything you'd expect from a classic JRPG. Except it definitely isn't a classic JRPG; it's knowing and it's self-aware. It's everything its predecessor was, but taken one step further. While *Final Fantasy* is off focusing on all these new 'fantasies set in reality' and whatnot, *Bravely Default* is filling the resulting void that this shift has created: if you yearn for the days of *Final Fantasy* through *Final Fantasy VI*, do yourself a favour and buy this game immediately.

The battle system hasn't changed too much since the prequel: you can still 'Brave' to gain a turn in the unique turn-based move ladder, or 'Default' to use a turn up and stack your attacks. In the first game, you could kind of predict how bosses would take advantage of this system and simply Brave the pain away, but thanks to the new classes and magic in the sequel, this simplicity is muddied somewhat – only ever to the game's advantage.

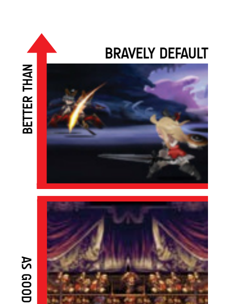
There's also a new gambit system post-battle: if you manage to kill every enemy unit in the first turn of your battle, you can choose to gamble and face another wave. All your turns owed and in-hand will remain, but if you can chain multiple battles in a row, you'll receive *huge* experience and ability point boosts. This takes the pain out of grinding, makes breaking through level barriers fun, and forces you to learn enemy archetypes and weaknesses if you want to succeed. Honestly, it's one of the best innovations we've seen in a classic JRPG in years. Who said the genre was stale?

The class system has been tweaked, too. As well as having some bizarre new disciplines (the Blue Mage-inspired Catmancer being the highlight), you don't suffer a penalty for switching between them, meaning configuring your team to overcome obstacles becomes part of the game's overall puzzle. Some areas can be frustrating, but the ability to modify encounter rates at will remains a blessing, and the auto-battle settings are frankly inspired. Little thoughtful mechanics like these take the edge off the grindy, repetitive nature that RPGs can very easily fall into.

Coloured with an off-the-wall story where the whole team of playable characters just wants to do good, and a plethora of side-activities that really suit a handheld console (there's a mode designed to be put on while your 3DS is idling, for example), *Bravely Second* is an improvement on everything the first game did well. It's a celebration of everything an RPG should be, with a smart, addictive battle system. As with *Bravely Default*, though, if you try hard enough, you can 'break' the game and become unbeatable with the right combo of classes and abilities. That's the one flaw in this otherwise watertight 3DS adventure.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix, Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Silicon Studio
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A





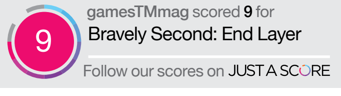
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

LUNA TICKS: StreetPass functionality lets you recruit friends to rebuild your moon base and take on optional superbosses. Sounds crazy, yet it's an oddly compelling mechanic.

VERDICT

PLAYFUL PROOF THAT THE CLASSIC RPG ISN'T DEAD



A LESSON IN ANGER MANAGEMENT

Hyper Light Drifter

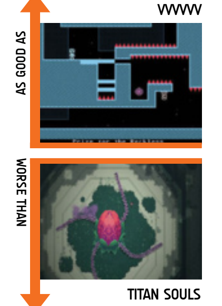
How difficult is too difficult? That's something we pondered constantly while grinding our way slowly through *Hyper Light Drifter*'s almost sadistically punishing dungeons and crushing boss battles. As we died for the umpteenth time in a room full of angry, laser-firing crows, we questioned whether or not we were even having fun. Often the answer was no.

The intro is as beautiful as it is sparse in detail. You play as an unnamed character in an unspecified, but seemingly post-apocalyptic landscape. A small village sits at the centre of four paths that branch off in the four directions of the compass. With no mission objective or waypoint marker you're left to wonder around until you discover one of numerous dungeons.

These caves are packed with enemies that launch swift and brutal attacks. The simplistic nature of the controls – you have a sword, a gun with limited ammo, and a dash evade – means that success in combat is entirely about speedy reactions and observation. But with only five hit points (at first), death comes swiftly. The punishment for death is relatively minor – you'll have to restart that enemy encounter. But it won't be uncommon for you to retry battles over a dozen times, if not more.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS4/PS Vita/Xbox One/Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Heart Machine
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7, 1.2Ghz CPU, 4GB RAM, 512MB GPU, DX10, 2GB disk space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Below: As well as legions of ball-busting enemies, dungeons also contain a plethora of death-dealing booby traps, like these giant sliding blocks that crush you for instant death if you're not fast enough. Because the battles aren't hard enough?



Skill upgrades can be purchased for tokens at the village, including a powerful special attack, but upgrade opportunities are so rare that the only real way to pass each challenge is to try and try again. On numerous occasions the battles felt so impossible that we questioned if we'd stumbled into a cave intended for a later stage in the game. Frustration would get the better of us and we'd leave to seek alternate paths, only to encounter equally if not greater challenges.

That said, you'll often retread old ground as you wander aimlessly in the hope of making some sort of progress, and player movement is *also* a source of frustration. Your sword swipes and dash animations have short but significant recovery times, which makes your character feel sluggish in a game that absolutely requires split-second reactions. And, frustratingly, each time you die you're forced to watch a multi-second animation of the character slowly climbing to their feet – another annoyance that other retry-heavy games like *Hotline Miami* were wise to avoid.

FINGERPRINT

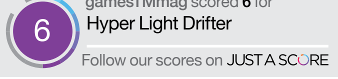
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

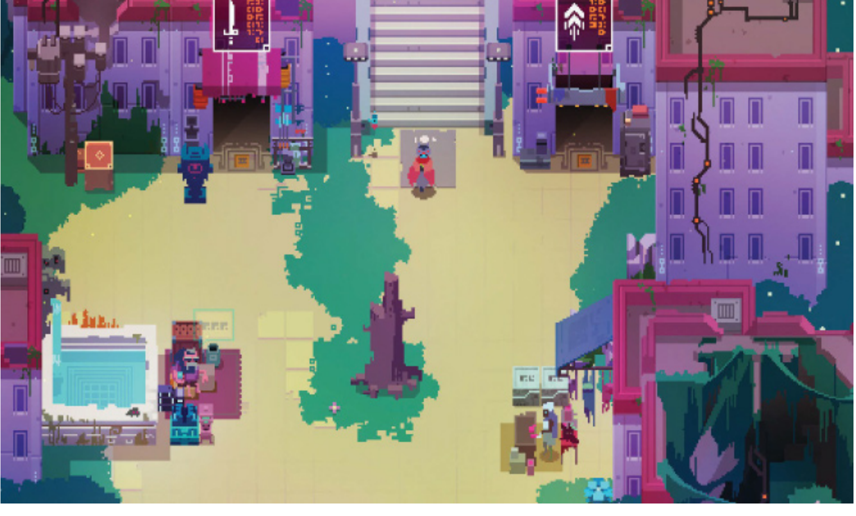
GUN SLINGER: You have a gun, but it can only shoot six bullets. New ammo is generated when you slice an enemy with your sword, making for some unique chop-and-shoot strategy.

We want so badly to love *Hyper Light Drifter*. It has all the hallmarks of a brilliant indie game – a stunning pixelated visual style, an incredible soundtrack and a mysteriously intriguing lead. It's a fast-paced action game with wonderfully simplistic controls and a proud lack of hand-holding. But it's also a game that seems to have been designed purely to test your patience, with insane difficultly spikes and pacing issues that will surely have all but the most resolute of gamers boiling over with frustration.

VERDICT

GORGEOUS, BUT MORE FRUSTRATING THAN FUN





Above: At the centre of the overworld map is a town of vendors where you can equip some much needed skill upgrades. You'll earn new abilities such as a super sword swing, bullet deflection, a dash attack and alternative guns.





"COMPUTER, SET A COURSE FOR FUN"

Ratchet & Clank

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Insomniac Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

It's rare to find a videogame so singularly intentioned as *Ratchet & Clank*. From its visuals to its audio, its platforming to its shooting, its levels to its cutscenes, this is a game focused on delivering one thing: enjoyment. Too often, fun and escapism are conflated with idiocy. "Dumb fun" and "mindless escapism" are phrases too often used to describe videogames' unique form of light entertainment, but *Ratchet & Clank* is surprisingly smart.

The environments are full of life and colour, but still lean and easy to navigate. The missions have depth and require skill, but never drag on. And the writing is razor sharp and everyone is solidly characterised. Clank's escape from the robot factory is a fantastic mini-movie, and Captain Qwark's Zapp Brannigan-style egoism lends the whole game a daft, knockabout tone. Kids will love it, but there are plenty of jokes for grown-ups too. It's not exactly Charlie Kaufman, but naming the spacey, jocular hoverboard racer "Skidd McMarx" is certainly a gag for the adults.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

NEW DOG, OLD TRICKS *Ratchet & Clank*, visually, is every bit the modern game. But Insomniac has kept the in-game "stuff" down to a minimum, and that's why it works. This is a cutting-edge looking platformer, but not bogged down by contemporary standards of quantity and "content."

Between classic videogame design and contemporary visual sheen, *Ratchet & Clank* is perfectly balanced. Today, a game of this size would be filled with collectibles, side-quests and other virtual junk. But Insomniac understands what made the original *Ratchet & Clank* so strong. It was the product of technical and hardware limitations, but stripped-down design of this kind is much more enjoyable than the "content"-rich open worlds of today. It's busy, but never does *Ratchet & Clank* bombard you with mindless things to do.

You constantly feel as if you are making progress – just ten minutes is enough to tick off a couple of missions and maybe a side-quest. This is a game that moves. Through multiple environments, new mechanics and a colourful cast of characters *Ratchet & Clank* quickly cycles, always excited to introduce you to something new. Never do you feel lost. Never are you intimidated by some sprawling map screen, covered in dots and icons. It's like a Pixar movie, funny, fast and easy to follow, but still with plenty of depth and lots of ideas. Making something this fun and this full, and moving so gracefully between different environments and set-ups, without the player ever losing track of where they are and why, represents some of the best in videogame writing and design.

In the most flattering sense, *Ratchet & Clank* plays like a PS2 platformer: brisk, nimble, self-contained, but visually it's up there with the best on the PS4; Insomniac has united two very different eras in videogame making. Focused on pure, wholesome fun, and without sacrificing intelligence or sophistication, *Ratchet & Clank* is one of the best platformers to date.

Below: Made in conjunction with the upcoming animated movie of the same name, *Ratchet & Clank* features some great gags for series fans and entirely re-recorded voice performances.



BETTER THAN

KNACK



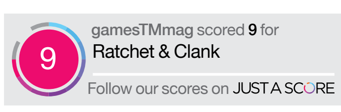
WORSE THAN



RATCHET & CLANK: A CRACK IN TIME

VERDICT

A VISUAL OVERHAUL GIVES NEW LIFE TO OLD MECHANICS



IN SPACE, NO-ONE CAN HEAR YOU VOMIT

EVE: Valkyrie

When you first start to play, you do just sit there and gawp. Clever engineering and VR magic tells your brain that you really are in the place you're seeing. And with *EVE: Valkyrie*, that means you become almost, *almost* convinced that you're actually the pilot of a space fighter craft.

There you are, in the cockpit. It's deliciously rendered, with scrolling panels above your head, a ton of HUD elements, and blinking lights everywhere. Outside the window is an astounding scene of capital ships in ruins and a darting battle raging. Inside, there's a joystick that moves with your commands, with an attached pair of hands.

You look down. The hands are attached to a torso just like yours, you have legs and arms, and you can choose to be male or female. As you lean around, the torso shifts to match you. Turn your head to the left and you'll see your shoulder move up. Lean forwards and the whole mass of flesh moves with you. It's uncanny, but convincing.

You should probably pay attention to the actual game, though. After all, if you've made it through *EVE: Valkyrie*'s very clever but slightly annoying VR menu, and gone through the initial tutorial (complete with Katee Sackhoff, aka Starbuck from *Battlestar Galactica*), then you'll almost certainly be in a place where people are shooting at you. With your gamepad in hand, you'll need to start taking part in this aerial melee.

And yet this is the also the point where some of you will almost certainly need to stop playing. On the Oculus Store, *EVE: Valkyrie* is rated as 'intense'. That's a rare high rating. It means, because of all the dodging, dogfighting and boosting, you'll feel like you're being flung all over the place, like Bond in a villainous centrifuge. You're also trapped in a closed, hot space. Weaker constitutions are quite unable to take it. We were fine for nausea, but after an hour started developing a pain in one eye that was presumably attempting things it wasn't evolved for. Others have felt immediately sick.

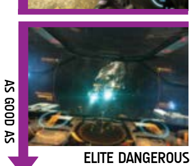
DETAILS

FORMAT: Oculus Rift
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PSVR, PC, HTC Vive
ORIGIN: Iceland
PUBLISHER: CCP Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £59.99 (Or free with Oculus Rift)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-16
MINIMUM SPEC: Oculus Rift / HTC Vive, Nvidia GTX 970 / AMD 290, 8GB Ram, Windows 7, 2 x USB 3 ports, HDMI 1.3 video output.
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

DUST 514





ELITE DANGEROUS

AS GOOD AS



Above: Loading times are not too bad for a VR title and certainly quicker than others we've experienced. The wonderfully stylish main menu HUD serves to distract you whilst you're waiting.

Below: The UI is heavily colour-coded, which is pretty awful for the colourblind among us, and great for everyone else.

BECAUSE OF ALL THE DODGING, DOGFIGHTING AND BOOSTING, YOU'LL FEEL LIKE YOU'RE BEING FLUNG ALL OVER THE PLACE



FAQs

Q. HOW MANY PLAYERS IS IT?

There are eight real human players to a side, but that will usually be topped up with bots.

Q. DOES IT TIE INTO EVE: ONLINE LIKE DUST 514 DID?

No, it's completely standalone. You don't need to know any of the lore from the other games.

Q. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

A cybernetically-enhanced version of you is resurrected to continue a perpetual war.

Below: The servers are mostly full of bots, but that's not a terrible thing – their AI is solid and often one or two human opponents are all you need to make the match exciting.



Still, if you can stomach the new way that your senses are trying to deal with the strange new information you're feeding them, it's time to get on with the important business of dogfighting. *EVE: Valkyrie* is set in the *EVE: Online* universe created by Iceland's CCP Games. It's a space opera sci-fi world, with giant capital ships, enormous galactic empires, mining and crafting. *Valkyrie* takes place in a small corner of that world, and lets you become a dogfighting ace. Luke Skywalker, essentially. Except that you've been raised from the dead to fight as a 'Valkyrie'. A thin single-player experience called 'Chronicles' lets you find out more of the story, by exploring the game's maps, or fighting AI bots in a Survival mode, but the meat is in multiplayer.

You start with a simple fighter, the Wraith, which is controlled from the gamepad in your hand. Its armament is traditional for a space fighter – a laser gatling gun and homing missiles, with other buttons boosting you, braking, or deploying chaff. Your lasers need to lead the target – daft, when you consider they travel at the speed of light, but we're so used to it from dogfighting plane sims that it feels oddly natural

Missiles, however, are a different story. When targeting a foe, you have to hold down the left trigger to lock on up to five of them. When you release, they shoot off, at which point the real game begins, as the head tracking ensures they hit their target. This is something common across weaponry for several different ship types; it's smart because it encourages you to not simply look straight ahead, a common flaw in many VR games.

Once you've got the basics down, the game is a joy. Hunting enemies through ship wreckage or getting involved in a spiralling meleé or winning a game of chicken-with-lasers or unleashing all of your missiles on an enemy and taking a moment to watch them try to shake them off… It's all classic adrenalin pumping stuff, delivered in a new and innovative way – the VR and head-tracking definitely gives it that extra level of immersion.

What's noticeable, though, is the lack of human players at the moment – on the European servers, most matches have just one or two, with the other places taken by AIs. It's not clear whether that's a design decision or a reflection of low server populations, but it does make the game a lot, lot easier.

Complete a mission and you get experience points for your ship and your character, as well a smattering of cash and resources. Unlocking upgrades and other ships in game is a slow process, especially given that you then need the right resources to craft them. It's also hard to notice the effects of an upgrade – though new craft are substantially different, even within the Fighter/Heavy/Support classes that are available.

Given that this is a free game, the developer is rather insistent that you purchase something with real money. Prompts to buy items with actual cash flash up after every mission, and the downtime between missions is normally around a minute – just long enough that you really are tempted by that new skin it's thrown up. You can rent new launch tubes (allowing you to pick from more than one ship in-mission), buy new skins, XP boosters and premium ships (which are fully-upgraded versions of the basic ships), and customise your ship with new paint jobs.

It remains to be seen what our more VR-savvy selves will think of this a year down the line; as people get used to any new hardware that first flush of excitement fades and it becomes normalised. If we're honest, stripping away the VR allure, this is a standard F2P arcade shooter with some polish. But, if you own Oculus, you should at least try it.

FINGERPRINT

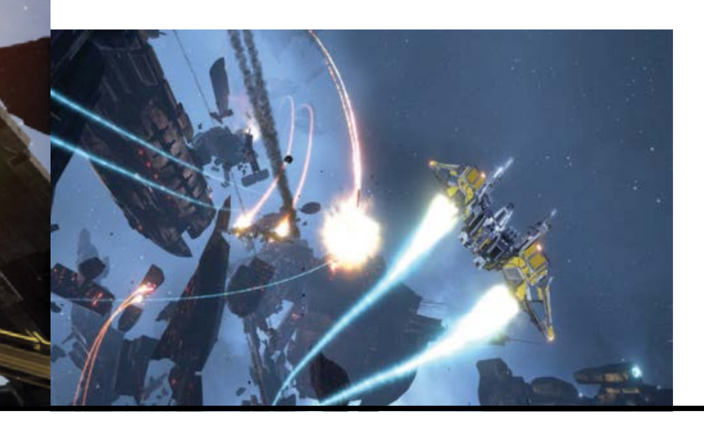
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HEAD-TRACKED MISSILES: Simply put, once you've locked on, if you can keep eyes on your target, your enemies are dead.
HIDDEN UI: To keep the player focused, core UI elements – like your speed – need you to turn your head to see them.



DUST TO DUST

This isn't CCP's first foray into expanding its universe. You may remember that back in 2013, CCP released *Dust 514* on PlayStation 3. It was an ambitious free-to-play first-person shooter that plugged straight into the *EVE* universe and allowed players to form mercenary corporations that could co-operate with the big guns in *EVE: Online* proper. Sadly, at launch it was a disappointment. We said that it was "in desperate need of a decade of evolution" and gave it 5/10. Despite that, the game is still going, but it won't be for much longer, but will shut down this month. CCP Shanghai is attempting to replace it with a new PC shooter, details of which should be available by the time you read this.



VERDICT

VR DONE RIGHT, IF YOU'VE GOT THE STOMACH FOR IT



gamesTMmag scored **6** for
EVE: Valkyrie
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IF IT AIN'T BROKE…

Lucky's Tale

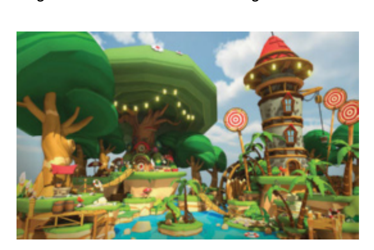
Ever since Sega decided it needed a rival to Mario, cute human-animal hybrids have been the standard platformer protagonists, especially when launching a new device. Think Knack for the PS4, Sonic for the Genesis, Banjo, Spyro and the rest. And now Lucky, Oculus Rift's bipedal fox. Like the vulpine protagonist himself, Lucky's world is a totally familiar one. Bouncy mushrooms, achingly-slow enemies and endless collectibles. It's bright, clean and quite obviously a game world. It's a perfect example of taking an existing genre – the 3D platformer – and transposing it to a VR environment.

The move has come with some improvements. Judging distances in a 3D space is much easier in VR than on a 2D screen. The side-on perspective allows levels to move in unusual ways through camera angle shifts, and for the designers to hide collectibles in places where you have to crane your neck, and the spot-on controls help this.

Still, much of it is familiar busywork. Collect things. Bounce on the enemies to hurt them, but not the special antibounce enemies, who you have to flip. Occasionally fight bosses, but not hard ones. Go down holes to traverse 2D underground courses and collect yet more stuff. And the game lacks challenge. It's easy to go through the 14 levels rarely losing a life and perhaps never loading.

Getting all the collectibles would take a little longer, but there's no real reason to do that, except for the fact that you need them to unlock later levels. So you're forced to grind back through completed levels to find more collectibles or do them in shorter times. That's a terrible design decision, reflecting a lack of happiness with the four-hour length of the finished product. (There are two modes unlocked if you finish the game, but they add nothing to the experience.)

Lucky's Tale is the least experimental, safest title we've played for a long time. It's perfect for handing over to someone who doesn't play games, to demonstrate VR – but *EVE: Valkyrie* is actually the one that they're more likely to be wowed by. It's the style of platformer that you'd be happy handing over to a seven-year-old, knowing that they'd be occupied for days, exploring and collecting and enjoying the bright, simple world in front of them. But for the rest of us, *Lucky's Tale* simply feels like a box that needed to be ticked at launch – tick, kid's platformer for free – and not a title with any real passion or creativity behind it.





DETAILS

FORMAT: Oculus Rift
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Oculus
DEVELOPER: Playful Corp
PRICE: Free with Oculus Rift
RELEASE: Out now
MINIMUM SPEC: Oculus Rift / HTC Vive, Nvidia GTX 970 / AMD 290, 8GB Ram, Windows 7, 2 x USB 3 ports, HDMI 1.3 video output
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
KNACK



WORSE THAN
SUPER MARIO GALAXY

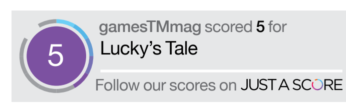
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

MORE CONTENT: The game needs something for the hardcore gamers – we'd like a *Super Meat Boy* style mirror world, with lots of the platforms removed.

VERDICT

A PERFECTLY AVERAGE PLATFORMER



SUCCESS IN VIEW, BUT OUT OF REACH

Adr1ft

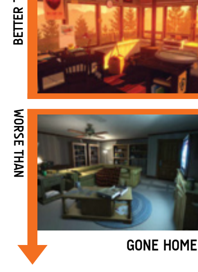
As a simulation of being stranded between the stars, *Adr1ft* is peerless. It's a claustrophobic exercise in catastrophe management, one that Hollywood has called shotgun on for decades. *Adr1ft* made us a hapless astronaut marooned in the wreckage of a shimmering space station, autonomous in a cataclysmic event that we've only ever glimpsed through a camera lens; purposefully guided ever-so-dramatically through the event.

But *Adr1ft* quickly separates itself from your typical cinematic space odyssey. It casts you as director, cinematographer, and lead in a torturous attempt to escape the crushing finality of death in a lifeless surrounding. The scale is unprecedented, as to is the suffocating sense of isolation it effortlessly exhibits. It succeeds in capturing the essence of very real astronautical fears, even if it fails to do much else with such poise and grace.

Adr1ft is a walking-simulator where your feet never quite touch the ground. It's a focused five-hour experience that exhibits the same narrative ambitions as the likes of *Gone Home*, only developer Three One Zero has attempted to pair its story-centric desires with dense and difficult mechanics. This creates a discord of sorts, turning *Adr1ft* into a shining (and unfortunate) example to the possibilities and limitations of the genre.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: 505 Games
DEVELOPER: Three One Zero
PRICE: £14.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows 7 64, Processor: Intel Core 2 Quad Q9550/ AMD Phenom 9850, Memory: 8 GB RAM, Graphic Card: NVIDIA GTX 650 2GB or AMD HD7770 2GB, DirectX: Version 11, Storage: 6000 MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: The compass in a cluttered UI seeks to keep you on the critical path, but it only operates on a 2D plane in a 3D space, making it infuriatingly cumbersome to actually use in an effort to fully discover the station.

You have complete control over a 360-degree range of movement; it's the disorienting key to total immersion, with every action forcing a little more oxygen to leak out of your malfunctioning suit. Your role in *Adr1ft* is focused around two tasks, survival; assembling the vital components needed to get back to earth, and discovery; dipping into small character vignettes of your missing crew that help bring heart to the sadly otherwise vacuous experience.

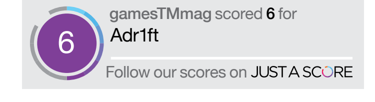
And therein lies the dichotomy between emotion and action in *Adr1ft*. Three One Zero wants you to get lost in the sound of silence – an ever-present well of anxiety that's rarely broken by anything more than the guttural and panic-inducing sound of suffocation – but navigation requires extreme precision and awareness. As too does your stressful management of your oxygen supply. This element alone seems to work against exploration; the acts of both movement and oxygen management can be so challenging that it can be difficult to muster the courage to truly immerse yourself in the game and search for computer terminals and voice recordings.

Ultimately, in spite of this, there's something hauntingly, disturbingly beautiful about *Adr1ft* that is to be admired. You'll notice it as you float perilously through the debris field of your shattered station, staring out at a sprawling galaxy rich with opportunity – the rhythmic beat of your heart quickening with every anxiety-inducing motion. The Earth is a constant fixture, your gaze falls to it without reason at every opportunity; looking upon it is as disheartening as it is astonishing, knowing that success will perpetually be in view, but ever-so slightly out of reach. But that's *Adr1ft*, a game that succeeds in being like no other but falls short of realising its potential.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VIRTUAL SPACE: regardless of whether you own a VR headset, *Adr1ft* will take you to one of the most engrossing virtual spaces we've ever seen in a videogame.

VERDICT
BEAUTIFUL AND HAUNTING, BUT FAILS TO FULLY ENGAGE







Above: Everything – from moving to activating thrusters – drains oxygen from your damaged suit. While oxygen is in fair supply inside the remnants of your ship, when you move into open space one wrong movement can be the difference between life and death.

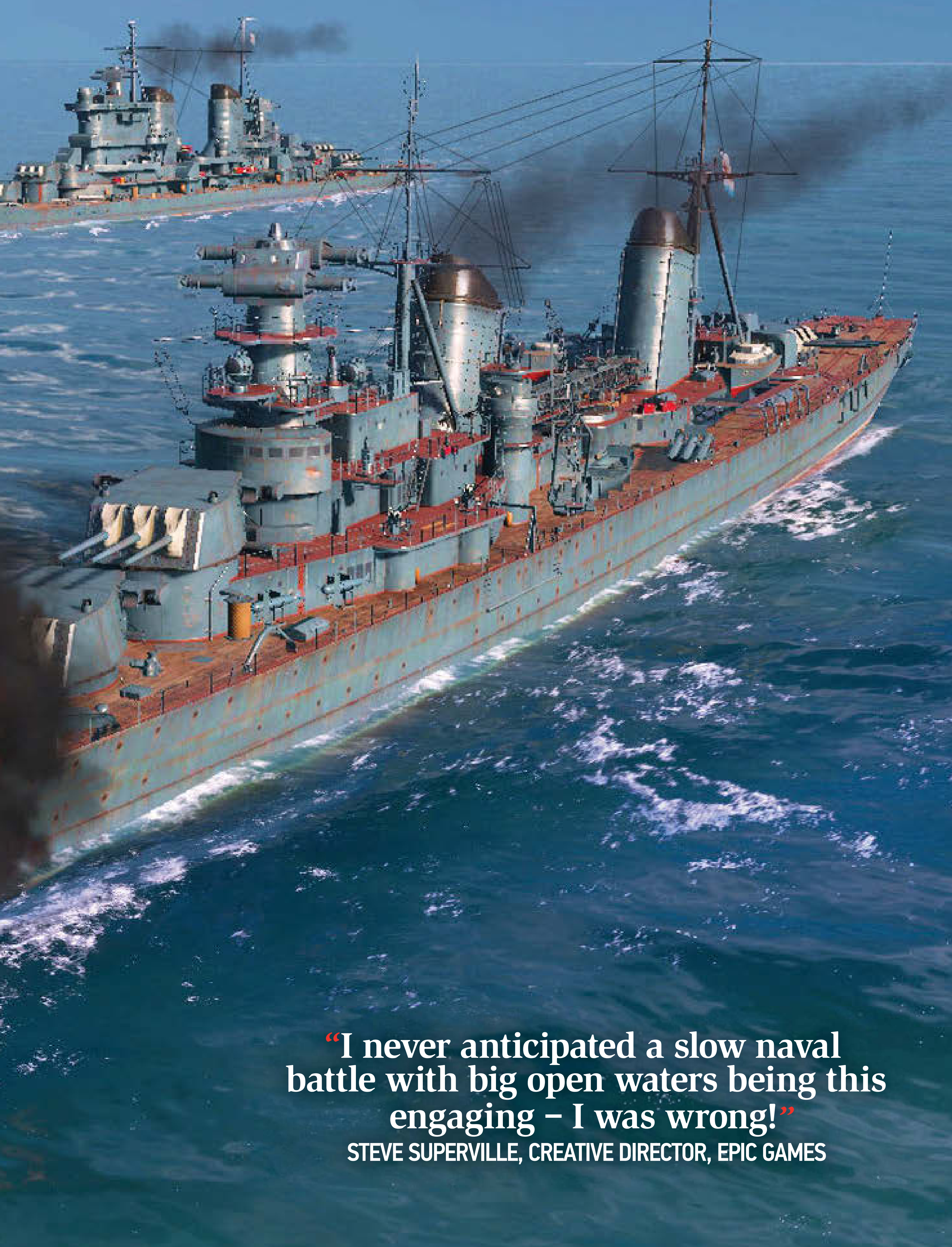


WHY I ♥...

WORLD OF WARSHIPS

STEVE SUPERVILLE, EPIC GAMES, CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF PARAGON

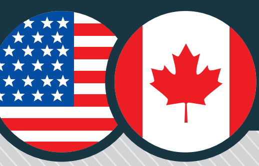
The game that I'm most recently hooked on that I just never expected to enjoy at all is World Of Warships. *Right now, I'm playing two games every evening until two in the morning; I'm alternating between* Paragon *– that game we're making – and* World Of Warships. *It has captured me in a way that… I don't even know how to describe it! It has such a sense of anticipation and foreboding; when you know a battleship has just fired at you and you see a salvo gently drift through the air, wondering whether you will turn out of the way in time or whether you'll get sunk. You know, at Epic we have this idea of surprise and delight, and I just never anticipated a slow Naval battle with big open waters being this engaging – well, I was wrong! It is just fantastic.*



"I never anticipated a slow naval battle with big open waters being this engaging – I was wrong!"

STEVE SUPERVILLE, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, EPIC GAMES

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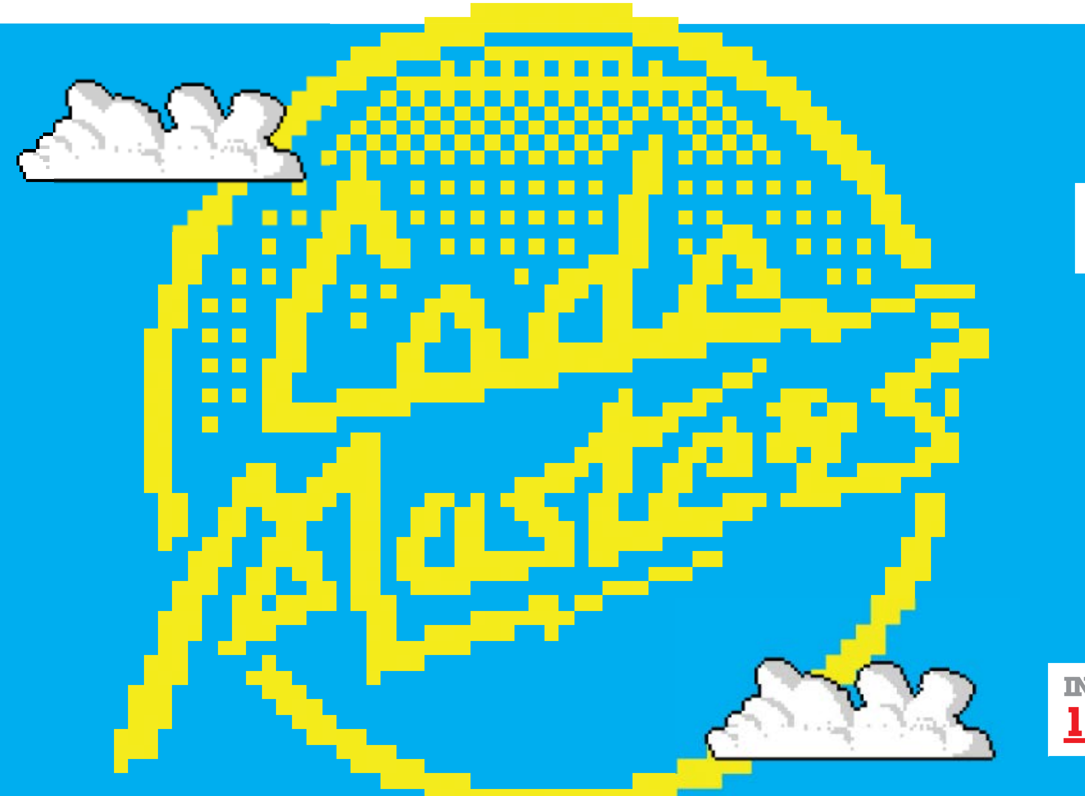
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THE RETRO GUIDE TO…

Code Masters

THE 8-BIT BUDGET YEARS

Stretching back 30 years, discover the many budget games that created the legacy of one of the UK's most established publishing houses

CODEMASTERS HAS BECOME one of the most established names in the UK games industry and has been running for a staggering 30 years. Famed in recent times for its racing games, it's been responsible for a number of notable driving franchises, including *TOCO*, *Colin McRae* and the *GRID* series and has never been afraid to dabble in other genres too with various degrees of success.

The Codemasters story actually begins in the early Eighties with Richard and David Darling. Fascinated with computers from an early age, they fell in love with coding and were soon making games, first for Mirrorsoft and Jetsoft and then for budget Kings Mastertronic. Rather than spend their money on whatever teenagers were interested in in the early Eighties, the brothers instead decided to create their own budget label, which would focus on quality.

BMX Simulator was the first Codemasters game to be released, a fun clone of *Super Sprint*, but with BMX bikes instead of racing cars. It was to become the first of many simulator games that Codemasters released during these early golden years. Codemasters was also the master of spin, having slogans on its games stating them to be 'absolutely brilliant' and bestowing many other accolades.

The early success of Codemasters must also be attributed to the Oliver twins, who the Darlings met during an ECTS show and had a similar work ethic to the Darlings. They created a huge output for Codemasters, including the popular *Dizzy* series. Join us then, as we concentrate on the budget period that helped build the Codemasters we know today.



TERRA COGNITA 1986

AMSTRAD, C64, SPECTRUM

In this shooter you have to travel as far as possible, whilst shooting down enemies. There are numerous tiles in the game that destroy your ship, extend its dwindling fuel supply or add bonuses like points and speed-ups. Just watch out for the annoying time shift tiles as they send you back to the start.





BMX SIMULATOR 1986

VARIOUS

This gem of a game was coded by Richard Darling and would be the first of many simulator titles that Codemasters would churn out in the following years. It's essentially a clone of *Super Sprint*, but with a BMX theme and a thumping good tune from David Whittaker. The lack of power-ups is a pity, but it features a fun two-player mode and a neat slo-mo option.

SUPER ROBIN HOOD 1986

AMSTRAD, C64, SPECTRUM

Super Robin Hood is notable as it makes the first of many Codemasters collaborations with the Oliver twins. Originally created for the Amstrad, it features digitised speech, a sprawling castle to explore and plenty of enemies to kill. Robin takes enemies out with arrows and must run around searching for hearts to restore his health. It became the Oliver twins' first number one game and was soon ported to other systems, including an eventual NES port. It's a little basic nowadays, but still proves to be entertaining.



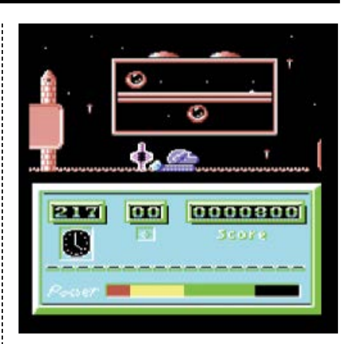


GHOST HUNTERS 1987

AMSTRAD, C64, SPECTRUM

Ambitious is the best way to sum up the Oliver Twins' follow-up to *Super Robin Hood*. It runs on a modified version of the same engine and features similar platform mechanics. The difference however is that pressing fire moves control over to an onscreen cursor, which you use to shoot enemies. It's a neat idea but too clunky in practice.





ARMOURDILLO 1987

C64

This interesting shooter is aesthetically stunning but far too difficult for its own good. The aim is to wait for pods to fall to the planet's surface so you can tow it to safety. It's as boring as it sounds and is riddled with unfair difficulty spikes. Great music, though.

BRAINACHE 1987

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

Terrible is the best way to sum up *Brainache*. The graphics will make you want to tear out your eyes; the awful sound effects will convince you to perforate your eardrums; while the gameplay is so stodgy and glitchy that you'll soon wish you had a time machine to stop yourself from ever playing this. Exploring a gigantic cave might sound like an interesting premise, but the actual execution is awful. Budget in every way.





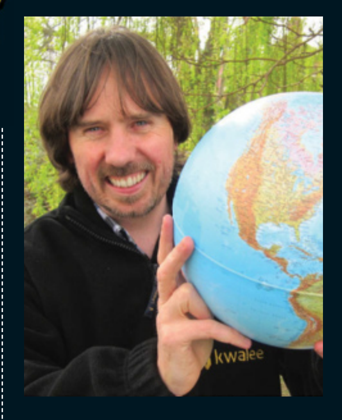
RICHARD DARLING LOOKS BACK

Codemasters' co-founder on how it started

So why did you call it Codemasters?
Me and Richard were programmers to begin with. So it was us being the masters of the code.

Tell us about the company...
Launching Codemasters was really fun. We had also been working with Mirrorsoft in the early Eighties but just like at Mastertronic, we couldn't do what we wanted to do and the games we wanted to do. When we ran Galactic Software we had our own publishing company and we liked that. It was good when we spent a year doing the first games at Codemasters. We launched the company with 12 games. It was September 1986.

Why did you make so many simulators – *BMX Simulator* was your first game, wasn't it?
It was really when me and Richard used to work and make games for Mastertronic. We commissioned lots of games from other programmers and most of the games were about science fiction because a lot of programmers were interested in it. They would make up science fiction stories and make space-orientated games and stuff based around fantasy. But when we analysed the sales figures at Mastertronic we realised it was games like *BMX Racers* that had been selling well. Richard wrote that game and at that stage, lots of kids were interested in BMX bikes and skateboarding. We thought programmers should not make games they were interested in but games that players were interested in and so when we formed Codemasters we wanted to code games that would have wide appeal. So we had *Grand Prix Simulator* and even *Fruit Machine Simulator*.



FRUIT MACHINE SIMULATOR 1987

VARIOUS

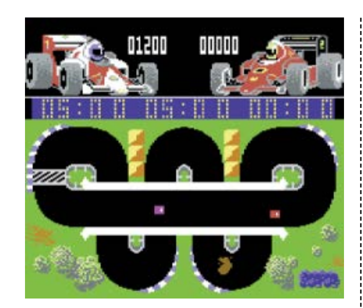
■ The most notable thing about this game is that it appears to be the only Codemasters release on the BBC Micro. Other than that, it's a simple fruit machine with a relatively straightforward interface and plenty of flashing elements. Although, once the realisation sinks in that you can't actually win money on it, it does take on an air of pointlessness past the first five minutes of frenzied gambling.





GRAND PRIX SIMULATOR 1987

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM



■ More simulator shenanigans, this time from the Oliver twins. It's effectively a home version of Super Sprint, but with completely different levels, some fairly decent digitised speech and an impressive range of tracks. It's okay, but is let down by some truly ferocious AI on later levels.

DIZZY 1987

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

■ *Dizzy* is the very first franchise that Codemasters had. Created by the Oliver twins, it's a decent arcade adventure where you must collect items to create a potion to destroy an evil wizard. While the gameplay is very entertaining it does feature a hideous trap that actually makes the game impossible to complete. Still, it's definitely worth a play if only to check out the origin of this iconic gaming character.



3D STARFIGHTER 1987

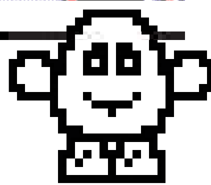
AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

■ Originally known as *C.H.A.O.S.*, the Oliver twins' game had to be changed at the last minute when they discovered another game with the same name. The game itself is a standard into-the-screen shooter with fastish sprites and very little else. It becomes more fun with a second player, but it hasn't stood the test of time well.





"DIZZY WAS THE VERY FIRST FRANCHISE THAT CODEMASTERS HAD"







PROFESSIONAL SKI SIMULATOR 1987

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

■ After having a ski holiday in Austria, the Oliver twins felt it would be the perfect subject for a videogame. While the graphics (inspired by *Marble Madness*) are impressive for the time, the actual gameplay is a little sluggish and you spend as much time battling the controls as you do your opponent.

BLADE WARRIOR 1988

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

Despite the name, you don't get to use a sword in this game; instead you have to leap from platform to platform avoiding small critters and dangerous inanimate objects. It's a tediously dull affair not helped by some grossly unfair collision detection that makes even the simplest of jumps a horrible challenge.

TREASURE ISLAND DIZZY 1988

VARIOUS

Dizzy was a slow burner but its sequel stormed straight to the top of the charts. It builds upon the mechanics first seen in the original game, but there's a bigger focus on puzzle solving this time around. The inventory system has also been changed, but if care isn't taken you can lose an item at the wrong time and lose a life. This is particularly relevant as, unlike the first game, you only get one chance to complete the game.





JET BIKE SIMULATOR 1988

AMSTRAD, C64, AS SPECTRUM

Jet Bike Simulator was one of the first games in Codemasters' new Plus range. The games typically cost £4.99 but came in a double cassette box with an additional tape – expensive, but still half the price of many full price games. Sadly, *Jet Bike Simulator* wasn't a good advocate for the new range, being a variant of *Super Sprint* with a watery theme and an additional tape of expert courses. Thankfully, a better Plus game was around the corner…





PROFESSIONAL BMX SIMULATOR 1988

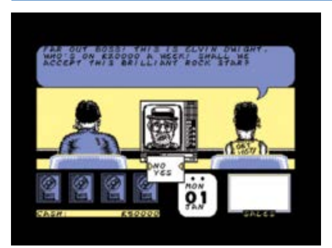
AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Richard Darling's sequel massively improved on his original 1986 hit. There were three different types of courses on offer and it was also possible to change the chain and wheels on your bike. Best of all, though, was an all-new four-player mode. This was another Plus game, but far better value for money, and with excellent presentation

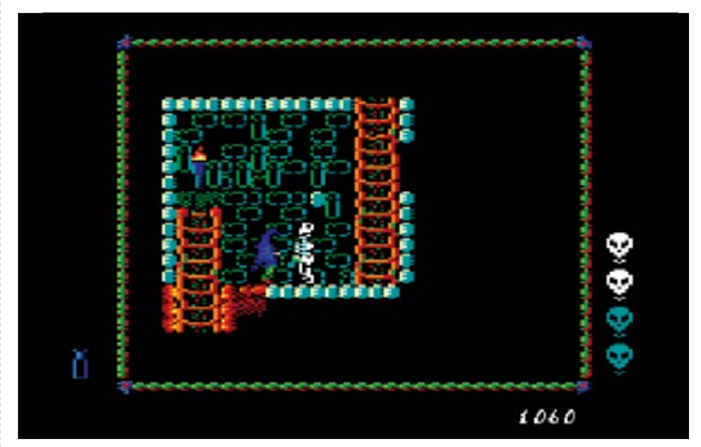


ROCKSTAR ATE MY HAMSTER 1988

VARIOUS



This wonderful spoof from Colin Jones allowed you to create a rock band and steer them to superstardom. It featured hilariously dodgy caricatures of some of the world's biggest stars with new names like Dorrissey, Rick Ghastley and Wacky Jacko. It remains one of Codemasters' most enduring and entertaining games.



DEATH STALKER 1988

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

The most novel aspect of *Death Stalker* is that it utilises line of sight, so you can't see behind doors until you open then. Other than that, it's a fairly straightforward adventure game that earns points for a truly atmospheric score, but loses them due to its dodgy combat. Oh, and a lost C64 port was discovered in 2012.





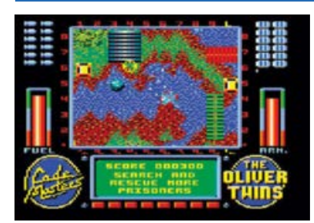
FAST FOOD! 1989

VARIOUS

Fast Food proved that *Dizzy* was a pliable enough character to star in things other than adventure games. It's basically a *Pac-Man* clone – the Oliver twins are huge fans of Namco's game – with 30 mazes to conquer, numerous power-ups that will give you the edge over your enemies and some amusing cutscenes.

OPERATION GUNSHIP 1989

AMSTRAD, SPECTRUM



Best described as a top-down version of Choplifter, this is a complex shooter from the Oliver twins and requires you to seek out and rescue P.O.W.s while avoiding incoming enemy fire. Your attack helicopter has access to several weapons and the control system is quite novel. Sadly, it's let down by some rather juddery scrolling.

> "OUR NEW CHARACTER NEEDED AS BIG A FACE AS POSSIBLE TO SHOW OFF HIS EXPRESSIONS"



FANTASY WORLD DIZZY 1989

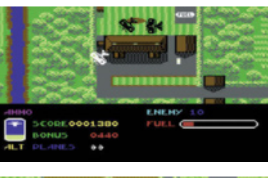
VARIOUS

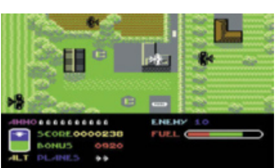
This enjoyable adventure really refines the best elements of the *Dizzy* games. It once again gives you multiple lives, has a far stronger focus on logical puzzles and greatly refines the inventory system. Best of all it expands Dizzy's family, introducing the Yolk Folk, which enhances the Dizzy universe. It's perhaps a little bit too hard in places, but the greatly enhanced graphics and larger playing areas ensured it was another gigantic success for the twins.

ARCADE FLIGHT SIMULTOR 1989

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Fans of Atari's 2600 hit *Combat* will be well served here as it's essentially more of the same. Sure, you can now take off, alter your altitude and refuel at certain points of the game, but this is still an arena-based shooter where you must take down enemies as quickly as possible. Needless to say, like *Combat*, it becomes a lot more satisfying when played against a human opponent.





FEELING DIZZY

Philip Oliver discusses an 8-bit icon

Let's start with the most important question: Why make Dizzy an egg?

In Ghost Hunters we had this really nicely animated man, but his face was 3x3 pixels with only four colours – there's not really a lot you can do with that. We quickly decided that our new fictional character needed as big a face as possible in order to show off happy, sad and scared expressions. Since the computers of the day were very slow, the whole character could only be 24 pixels by 32 pixels, which quickly led us to a character that was practically all face, leaving just enough room for some gloves and boots to help him get around and interact with his fantasy world.

What made you decide to put him in an adventure game?

When we created Dizzy we wanted to create an adventure with fantastic places to explore, characters to meet and puzzles to solve. We had just had huge commercial success with *Super Robin Hood* and therefore wanted to use the same platform format since we'd not only already programmed this but knew players liked this type of game. The puzzles were grounded in stories and scenarios that everyone would be familiar with. We didn't want obscure puzzles based on physics or maths because it was important to us that younger players weren't disadvantaged. We wanted interesting, fun



puzzles, so we took inspiration from classic tales and fables.

What were the sales like?

When *Dizzy* was released, nobody really knew about it and, to be honest, the box artwork was fairly poor. It took time for word of mouth to spread and sales to pick up. Once people started to play it, though, they seemed to engage with it and we soon gathered quite a following.

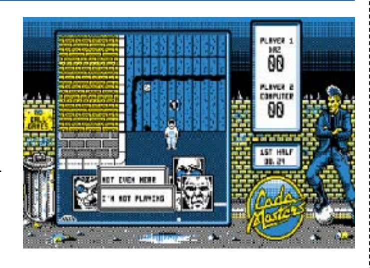
Why do people have such fond memories of Dizzy?

I think the *Dizzy* games are remembered fondly because people had to think about the worlds and characters we created and, like a good book, people's imagination was let loose. What they were seeing was merely a small window into a fantastic magical world full of adventure, with interesting places, characters and stories to explore. The basic nature of the graphics in those days meant that gameplay was all, so if you gave people fun they'd keep coming back for more. It's very easy for developers to forget that these days.

STREET GANG FOOTBALL 1989

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

You've not experienced a truly terrible game until you've played *Street Gang Football*. The collision detection is ropey, the scrolling is laughable, while it's increasingly hard to select the footballer you want. In fact, it's so poor the actual players get in heated arguments over scored goals and refuse to play, abruptly ending the game.



PUB TRIVIA 1989

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

This is a surprisingly solid trivia game, offering you a large number of multiple choice answers. You're obviously up against the clock and as you climb higher on the board the questions get surprisingly tough. It caters for up to four players and also features three blocks of questions, so repetition shouldn't become an issue.

MAGIC LAND DIZZY 1990

VARIOUS

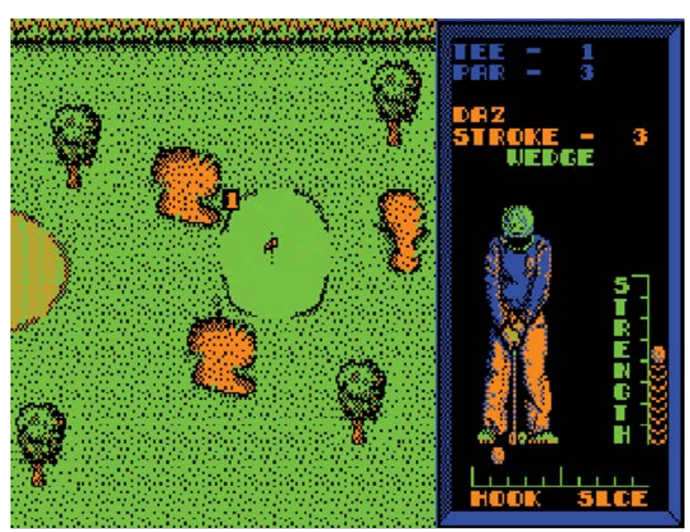
This is the first of three *Dizzy* adventures in 1990 (the Oliver twins would start contracting the series out to Big Red Software to keep up with demand). Dizzy now has an energy bar, which makes survival far easier than before. It's otherwise another slick adventure with some surprisingly great puzzles.



PRO GOLF SIMULATOR 1990

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

This is a very comprehensive golf game, particularly for its £2.99 price point. You can practice your swings or putts (which admittedly takes a while to master) and then take part in a competition for up to three other players. Best of all there's a golf editor that enables you to create your own courses.



BUBBLE DIZZY 1990

VARIOUS

The idea behind this arcade game is simple, but the execution is just so fiddly. Essentially, you're simply trying to rise from the bottom of the ocean by jumping on bubbles and avoiding the ocean's many deadly sea creatures. Sadly, overly tricky controls and randomly popping bubbles are more frustrating than enjoyable.





WACKY DARTS 1990

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

The wackiness refers to your opponents, who throw shurikens, axes and other weapons at the dartboard as they play. To reflect the difficulty of the real game, the developer used a constantly moving disembodied hand that you have limited control over. It's a nice compromise.





LITTLE PUFF IN DRAGON LAND 1990

VARIOUS

Although it replaces a walking egg with a dragon, this is still a *Dizzy* game, albeit an incredibly basic and boring one. While the available puzzles are extremely simple to work out, it's let down by the fact that there's only a single life. An equally pointless sequel arrived in 1992.



TILT 1990

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

This puzzle game by Stephen Walters is simplistic but incredibly addictive. Simply tilt the maze to roll the ball to the exit while using the fire button to open gates. It's basic, sure, but like many seemingly simple games, it's rather addictive and becomes incredibly hard to stop playing once you get the hang of it.

CJ'S ELEPHANT ANTICS 1991

VARIOUS

This platformer by Jonathan Smyth is tremendous. It's effectively a great clone of the popular arcade game *The New Zealand Story*, but with a cute elephant in lieu of a cute kiwi. Oh and it has a cracking simultaneous two-player mode too.





SEYMOUR AT THE MOVIES 1991

VARIOUS

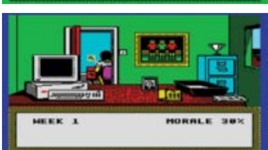
According to *Zzap! 64* magazine, this was originally going to be a *Dizzy* game until Codemasters got cold feet about putting him in a real world location. Once you're aware of that fact, it's easy to see the similarities, as *Seymour At The Movies* shares many of the mechanics of the later *Dizzy* games, including a three-item inventory system and energy bar. It's a little easy, but enjoyable all the same, with great punchy sprites.

1ST DIVISION MANAGER 1991

AMSTRAD, C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Codemasters' first football manager simulator is pretty lacking. The menu interface is pretty decent, but the match highlights are incredibly naff using horrible stickmen and ugly colour schemes. It offers very little beyond *Kevin Toms' Football Manager*, which was nearly a decade older.

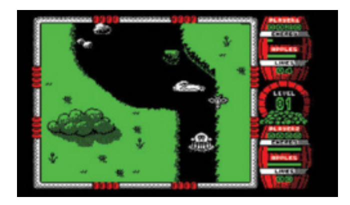




DIZZY DOWN THE RAPIDS 1991

VARIOUS

Dizzy once again gets shoehorned into a non-adventure game and it's once again not very good. The idea is to float down the rapids while chucking apples at enemies. The concept is sound enough (it's a riff on the excellent arcade hit *Toobin'*) but it's let down by poor controls and a high difficulty level.

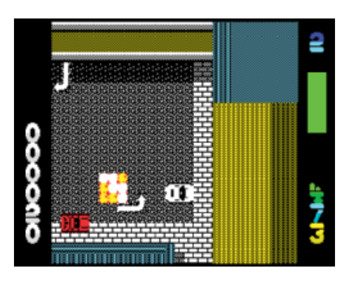




MIAMI CHASE 1991

VARIOUS

The most notable thing about *Miami Chase* is that it was created by Team 7, later known as Team 17, the creator of *Worms*. It's otherwise a completely naff top-down version of Chase H.Q. that requires you to race around the tiny city looking for a suspect car to crash into. A poor game with incredibly twitchy controls.





PARIS TO DAKAR 1991

ZX SPECTRUM

This is a solid little racing game that lets you choose whether to drive a truck, mini metro or motorbike, all of which rather refreshingly handle quite differently to each other. The bike is by far the most challenging to use as it's extremely fast and takes damage very easily, making it best left for more experienced players.

"SEYMOUR AT THE MOVIES SHARES MANY OF THE MECHANICS OF THE DIZZY GAMES, INCLUDING A THREE-ITEM SYSTEM AND ENERGY BAR"

CJ IN THE USA 1991

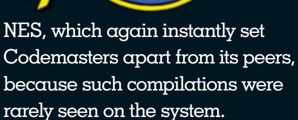
VARIOUS

The popularity of the first CJ meant another arrived a few shorts months later. While it mostly sticks to the same formula as before, it's not quite as polished and the controls aren't quite as tight. The level structure is also more maze-like which gets quite frustrating. The C64 version is the one to go for.



BUDGETING TO THE EXTREME

How to cut costs and stand out from the crowd



Back in the Eighties a company would think nothing of re-releasing its hit games in compilations. While some of the bigger compilations of 50-odd games were typically filled with rubbish, there were more than enough publishers out there who did release compilations of value. Codemasters was no exception, but it did things a little differently.

While other companies continued to release compilations in tape form the Oliver twins came up with a novel way to run games on a CD, by connecting a CD player to the joystick port of an 8-bit computer. This was deemed revolutionary and the CD's storage space meant an impressive 30 games could be included. Games could be loaded incredibly quickly and were easier to find too. Sadly, the compilation didn't sell well, with the twins concluding that the owners of said CD players had left their 8-bit systems in favour of the Amiga and ST.

As well as releasing traditional compilations, mainly revolving around Dizzy, Codemasters also introduced the Quattro range, which featured four games for a reasonable £2.99. The brand even made its way over to the NES, which again instantly set Codemasters apart from its peers, because such compilations were rarely seen on the system.







TARZAN GOES APE 1991

C64, ZX SPECTRUM

Tarzan's been turned into a monkey by a witch doctor who won't change him back until a specific number of items have been collected. While the graphics are nice and cartoony, Martyn Hartley's game suffers from poor collision detection – you can fall through floors – and a high difficulty factor.

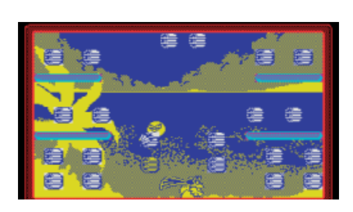
MOUNTAIN BIKE 500 1991

AMSTRAD, ZX SPECTRUM

Mountain Bike 500 borrows heavily from *ATV Simulator* – you and your bike need to traverse lots of different environments. Sadly, the game is needlessly difficult due to your biker snagging on seemingly safe objects.









SUPER SEYMOUR 1991

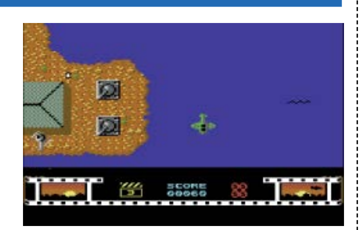
ZX SPECTRUM

Unlike many of Seymour's other games, this is a straightforward arcade romp. It's basically Codemasters taking a *lot* of inspiration from *Bomb Jack* and it's pretty good too. The levels are well designed and you'll get multipliers if you collect items in the right order. The only downside is sprites are overly big, which can make some sections a little tricky.

SKY HIGH STUNTMAN 1991

VARIOUS

Don't be fooled by the stuntman theme, this is just a shoot-em-up and a rather straightforward one at that. While your craft is relatively nippy, its actual firing is rather sluggish, which makes shooting something of a chore. It doesn't help that the ridiculous fast enemy bullets are exceptionally accurate.



SOCCER PINBALL 1992

VARIOUS



It sounds like a ridiculous concept, but combining football with pinball works well. The table is set up like a football pitch with a number of defenders and a goalie. Once you've knocked all the defenders out of the way you can take a shot at goal. It's works surprisingly well, but is let down by some weak physics and juddery ball movement.

SLICKS 1992

C64, ZX SPECTRUM



Easily the best top-down racer that Codemasters released. There's a strong collection of tracks on offer, the AI is challenging but always fair, while the graphics are very detailed. In addition to an excellent Grand Prix mode, there's also an excellent one-on-one mode that is essentially *Micro Machines*. As Codemasters would say, it's absolutely brilliant.

STUNTMAN SEYMOUR 1992

VARIOUS

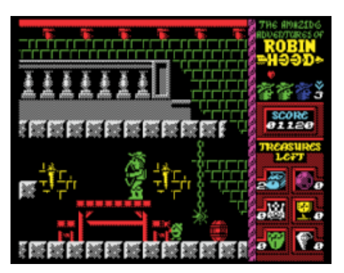
This is essentially just a CJ game, but with Seymour standing in for the popular elephant. While it features some very nice scrolling and great visuals, the actual level design doesn't feel as tight as the original CJ outing. It's also a little tougher due to some questionable collision detection.

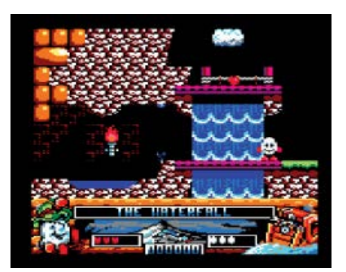


ROBIN HOOD: LEGEND QUEST 1992

VARIOUS

Although the Spectrum version suffers from terrible attribute clash, this remains a very solid platformer. The action is nice and fast-paced, and there are plenty of items for the player to collect. Keys open up new areas of the castle too, meaning exploration is always rewarded. Like many of Codemasters' later games it had a £3.99 price tag.





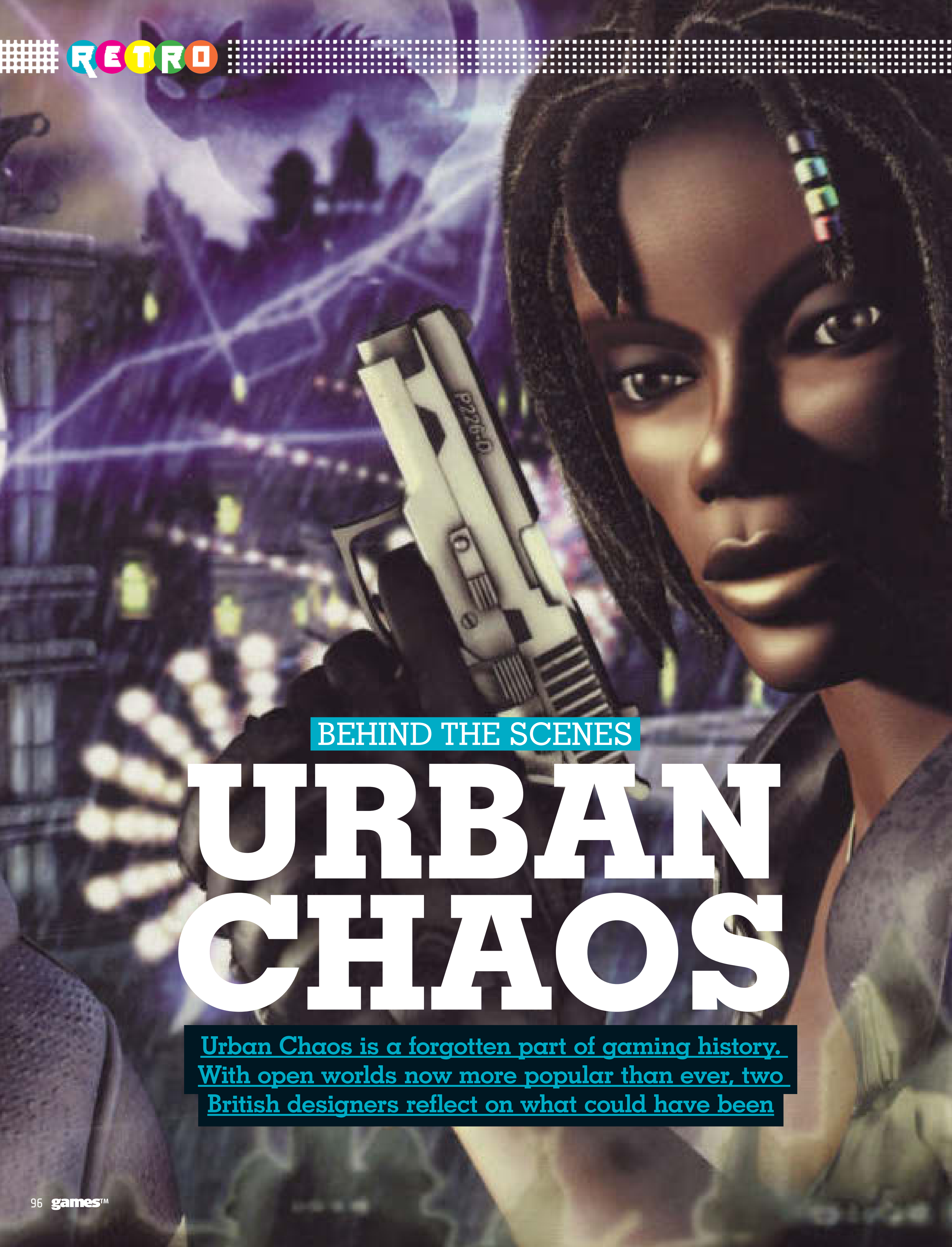
CRYSTAL KINGDOM DIZZY 1992

VARIOUS

It's fitting that one of the last Codemaster's games released for 8-bit home computers (it came out in December) was a *Dizzy* game. Despite being another entertaining adventure with lovely cartoon visuals and clever puzzles, *Crystal Kingdom* also came with a £10 price tag, meaning the budget days of Codemasters were well and truly over.

MORE TO TRY

- INTERNATIONAL RUGBY SIMULATOR, VARIOUS, 1988
- MONTE CARLO CASINO, VARIOUS, 1989
- NINJA MASSACRE, VARIOUS, 1989
- SAS COMBAT SIMULATOR, VARIOUS, 1989
- ITALIAN SUPERCAR, VARIOUS, 1990
- DIZZY: PRINCE OF THE YOLKFOLK, VARIOUS, 1991
- GRELL AND FELLA, VARIOUS, 1992



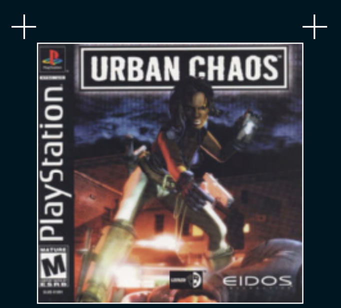
BEHIND THE SCENES

URBAN CHAOS

Urban Chaos is a forgotten part of gaming history. With open worlds now more popular than ever, two British designers reflect on what could have been



The game's early missions involved fairly routine police work, like rounding up drunks and arresting muggers. The later stages or *Urban Chaos* turned very, very sci-fi.



Released: 1999
Format: PC, PS1, Dreamcast
Publisher: Eidos
Key Staff: Simon Keating, level designer, Barry Meade, designer, Stuart Black, artist

***Wolfenstein* CREATED THE** first-person action game, *Resident Evil* invented survival horror, *Grand Theft Auto 3* established the 3D open-world. Right? These are the widely accepted markers in videogame history, the monumental games we most often think of when looking into our culture's past. But before *Wolfenstein*, way back in 1981, there was *3D Monster Maze*. Eight years later, and seven years before *Resident Evil*, Capcom released *Sweet Home*, a horror adventure set inside a monster-filled mansion. And in 1999, a ten-person studio based in Guildford built and released *Urban Chaos*, one of the first games to combine shooting, driving, fighting and exploring a 3D city.

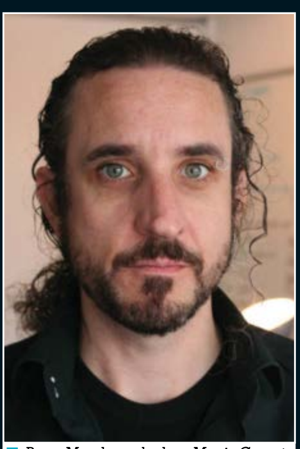
Mucky Foot was a small operation. Founded by Mike Diskett, Findlay McGechie and Guy Simmons, all former employees of Peter Molyneux's Bullfrog, it opened its doors in 1997: a single, open plan floor, above an old hardware shop, served as the office. The original pitch for *Urban Chaos* was a 2D platformer, something manageable for a plucky start-up. But publisher Eidos wanted more. To secure funding, Mucky Foot – which would eventually include two more Bullfrog veterans, Stuart Black and Gary Carr – had to flesh out *Urban Chaos* considerably, turning it from an old-fashioned side-scroller into a pioneering open-world action game.

Enter Simon Keating. Previously of Croc developer Argonaut Software, he arrived at Mucky in 1998 and acted as one of Urban Chaos's first level designers. "They had this place above Brewer's DIY, and they'd knocked through all the partition walls," Keating says. "We just worked on one side of the office. The rest was empty. I was brought in as the sixth member of the team, once they needed someone to take on the design of *Urban Chaos* and start using the editor – which they'd already made – to begin building the levels."

Urban Chaos was an ambitious project. Inspired by the original *Grand Theft Auto* (a very different beast to its later instalments), Mucky Foot aimed to create an open-world crime saga with a new, unique selling point: instead of being two dimensional and viewed from the top down, the city of *Urban Chaos* would be rendered in full 3D. Buildings could be climbed, rooftops could be explored and, of course, cars could be stolen and bad guys beaten up. Missions and objectives would be set on the fly. Gang members would attack randomly and without warning. Instead of separating levels based around each objective and fight, Mucky wanted to create a sense of expansive flow – technological constraints stopped the studio short of building an entire working city, but each of *Urban Chaos*'s environments would give the impression of a place and a population beyond what the player could see.

> **IN THE PRE-GTA DAYS, THERE WAS NO MODEL, NO GUIDE FOR US… IT WAS COOL AND NEW**

This was a tough illusion to pull off. At its peak, *Urban Chaos* was being worked on by just ten full-time developers. Eidos proved cautious when it came to funding – "They never put that much into it," says Keating – and Mucky's in-house tools, originally designed for the creation of a 2D platform game, were often inadequate. "I'd use isometric paper to lay out all the worlds and


Barry Meade worked on *Magic Carpet*, *Syndicate Wars*, and more recently games like *LittleBigPlanet 2*.



Urban Chaos was filled with incidental characters and optional conversations, though interiors largely had to be cut.

PORT OF CALL

Originally built for PC, Urban Chaos was tough to translate for consoles

■ PARTICULARLY FOR ITS time, *Urban Chaos* was an enormous game. On high-end PCs it could run no problem. For consoles, particularly the PS1, it had to be stripped down and reassembled.

"Thanks to budget and time constraints, we had just one coder working on the ports," explains Simon Keating. "We had to fog the PlayStation version right up because of how many polygons it could handle. Even then, without the draw distance, the frame-rate suffered."

"PC and PS1 were night and day in terms of power," continues Barry Meade. "The PS1 had unusual problems such as texture warping, an effect where texture co-ordinates of a poly would lose accuracy at the borders of the screen. The console was too long in the tooth for a game like *Urban Chaos*."



indicate all the mechanics and things we could do, and then implement them using this editor," explains Keating. "But the editor was pretty terrible. You could only model in wireframe and couldn't rotate to view what you'd built in full 3D – it was either a top down view or slightly to the left, in a kind of isometric view. Whatever you made ended up as a kind of wireframe mess, meaning you had to build it and run it in game just to get a proper look. And obviously the build process was long. We moaned about it all the way through development."

Creating 3D buildings – buildings that could be climbed and explored – wasn't only a problem from a technical point of view. The *Urban Chaos* art team wanted the game's metropolis, Union City, to look and feel believable, and the designers wanted something that would be fun to play. Attempting to marry the two disciplines created constant back and forth.

"There was always… not disagreement, exactly, but interest on both sides between art and design," says Keating. "I had the editor so I could build completely crazy platformer style levels – everything could be laid out in blocks, almost like *Minecraft*. But that created conflict with the artists because they lost control on how it looked. They'd say 'That doesn't look like a church,' or something. The problem was we didn't have a cool animation system, something like *Assassin's Creed* that allows the character to stand at any angle on any roof. Our character, D'Arci, could either stand on half-metre by half-metre blocks or, if she came to a block that was one metre, she could climb – that was it.

"Also, there was no dynamic lighting. All the lights were just painted into the textures. So I was trying to build this large city using only very limited textures, and obviously it would repeat itself a lot. We had to find a compromise between making it look realistic and also having the fun gameplay. We eventually agreed that, basically, I would ignore all the textures and just block the levels out and get the gameplay right. After that the artists would come in and adjust things and start to make the levels look more realistic. We aimed high. We did as well as we could."

To help patch things up, Mucky hired in Barry Meade, a freelancer whose previous credits included city and level design on Bullfrog's *Syndicate Wars*. When he first encountered *Urban Chaos*, it was in a sorry state.

"Mucky Foot had been in research and development hell for years," explains Meade. "In terms of the game content it was sorely lacking. It consisted, basically, of an engine, a few city maps and two characters who could run around those maps. There was no game at all, no finished levels, no missions or levels, no story or anything. It was the classic 'bag of bits' – lots of disparate parts but none of them strung together.

"Perhaps the game was in people's heads but it wasn't in the software. It ran slow, it played badly, the animations were rudimentary, the fights were boring. We had to design the city, design the levels and the missions, write the plot, story and script and then finally tie them all together. It was a ton of work."

It wasn't all doom and gloom – partway through *Urban Chaos*'s development, Mucky scored a couple of breakthroughs. First came a new level editor, which, finally, allowed wireframe models to be scrutinised in full 3D. Second, "Mucky Script," a scripting language created by Mike Diskett, allowed characters and mission events to be triggered organically. Armed with these new tools, Keating and Meade quickly got to work. They added waypoints and radiuses, meaning that when players crossed invisible lines, objectives could activate and battles could be triggered.



■ Rather than build a full open-world, Mucky Foot used creative architecture and created the illusion of a city.





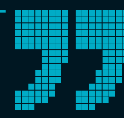
Simon Keating went on to work with EA and later Doublesix on a couple of licensed projects.





If the fighting controls were more compelling, or the missions gave you more to do than beat up everyone in sight, Urban Chaos might have been a strong action contender.

PC Gamer, 1999



"Coming from Bullfrog, all of us at Mucky were big believers in powerful tools and engines," says Meade. "Mike and the code team made really usable and powerful tools. It was quick work to put a few city blocks together and start slapping details on them. The mission designer tool was great, too. It had this cool nodal structure of collapsible, nested data-points, all connected together like a web. It was very simple and clean. Everything we did was real-time, so we could edit, then press a button and were instantly playing the game. Even a decade later, studios I worked at couldn't do level design like that."

Mucky Script was fundamental, not just when it came to mapping out missions and objectives in *Urban Chaos*, but helping to make Union City feel more alive. Aside from the architecture, one of the key challenges of building a living, breathing metropolis – or at least the illusion of one – was pedestrian AI. Enemies could be spawned and D'Arci had buildings to clamber over, but to get the population of Union to look and behave plausibly, Keating, using the new scripting language, had to perform a lot of design work.

"There was an AI system for the traffic, one sort of brain that made the cars behave by themselves, but everything else was entirely scripted," he explains. "All the pedestrians, all the guard patrols, were scripted – every pedestrian was given a linear path, and would walk it back and forth. Nowadays you would have a whole system, and you could put as many pedestrians in as you wanted, and they'd all just follow their own brain. But we did it all manually. If you look at the raw levels, there are a lot of spines, nodes and waypoints in there."

This was just one of the tricks Mucky used to get the ambitious *Urban Chaos* to work on contemporary hardware. The team also had a neat workaround when it came to interiors. Instead of building entirely separate rooms, and a loading screen in between inside and outside locations, Keating simply cut a room sized block out of the bottom of one of the game's skyscrapers, covered it with a door texture, which players could walk straight through, and then decorated the inside to look like an office. "As far as the game was concerned you were still outside," he explains. "We just changed the grass into carpet."

MUCKY FOOT HAD BEEN IN RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT HELL FOR YEARS

But not everything Mucky – or Eidos – planned for *Urban Chaos* was possible. Hardware constraints, short funding and in-house technology that was still largely insufficient meant swathes of the game had to be cut.

"We wanted a playground in the sky, with all the roofs of the buildings, but also underground," explains Keating. "We originally had an underground sewer network that we were going to do. But we scrapped it. We were going to have more interiors with more detail, too, but those also got scrapped."

"In the pre-*GTA* days, there was no model, no guide for us," continues Meade. "Back then, 90% of 3D games were actually 2D or 2.5D, so wrapping our heads around the fact that D'Arci could run along the street, then hop onto a fence, scamper up a drain pipe then run across the rooftops was very cool and new, and as far as making the levels flow, it really came down to designing clear, easy to read worlds with a natural path through them. We emphasised natural paths in various ways such as putting interesting objects around them, or lighting them more brightly, or the plain old way of adding pick-ups to tempt players through an area. Ultimately however, it's hard not to say we failed on the environments. The city designs were just one of many areas in the game that could have been so much better had we had time to give them the love they deserved."

Urban Chaos released for PC in November, 1999. A PS1 port would follow in March, 2000, then a Dreamcast version seven months later. Some reviewers loved it, some didn't. Most agreed that it had ambition. Regardless, it struggled to be heard over the rush of open-world games that shortly followed. 1999 also brought *Driver*, the Seventies-inspired sandbox car-chase sim from

THE MILLENNIUM BUG

At the turn of the century, open-world design swept through gaming



Towards the end of the Nineties, thanks to sophisticated technology and a few visionary developers, open-world games started to bloom. By 2001, the revolution was well underway. Fifteen years later, sandbox games remain incredibly popular. Here's how it happened…

1997
1997 kicked off with *Final Fantasy VII*, the first instalment of Square's long-standing RPG franchise to go fully 3D. The first ever *Fallout* then arrived in September, quickly followed by the original *Grand Theft Auto*.

1998
Baldur's Gate, *Thief: The Dark Project* and *Fallout 2* all released in 1998, giving players vast environments to explore and multiple ways to achieve their goals. Even platformers caught the open-world bug: levels in *Spyro The Dragon* and *Banjo-Kazooie* were accessed via a sandbox "overworld."

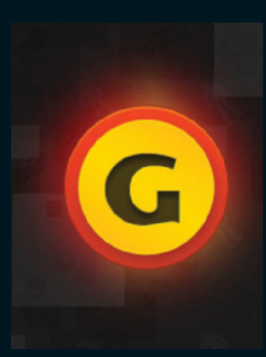
1999
Grand Theft Auto 2 continue to push the boundaries by adding more missions, sub-missions and even a relationships system, allowing players to align themselves with different gangs. *Driver* and *Urban Chaos* took console open-worlds into 3D.

2000
With the release of both *Deus Ex* and *Shenmue* the sandbox revolution was truly under way. These were massive, explorable worlds, filled out with hundreds of characters and quests. IO Interactive joined the cause, too – *Hitman: Codename 47* lets players approach levels in a variety of ways.

2001
Final Fantasy X, *Halo: Combat Evolved* and of course *Grand Theft Auto 3*. 2001 was the year that open, choice-led game design became the new black. The following year would see *State of Emergency*, *The Getaway*, *Headhunter*, *The Elder Scrolls 3*, *GTA: Vice City*, *Mafia* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*, all of which were based around massive sandbox worlds. The rest is history



WHAT THEY SAID…



Urban Chaos does an admirable job of making you feel as if you're wandering around a living city. The texture work, architecture, and smoke and lighting effects are gorgeous..

GameSpot, 2000



Reflections. Shortly after, Ion Storm released Deus Ex and Sega put out Shenmue. When *Grand Theft Auto 3* arrived in 2001, any legacy *Urban Chaos* might have had – its place in history as one of the first 3D sandboxes to include driving, shooting and fighting – was lost. Now, despite open-world games being more popular than ever, and largely built around tropes and standards that were pioneered in *Urban Chaos*, Keating and Meade remain unsure about the game's footprint.

"I love open world games but I don't think they owe anything to *Urban Chaos*," says Meade. "For me, *Urban Chaos* failed to reach what it could have been, so I have no thoughts of greatness, more sadness. It was potentially a world-class game, brought low by circumstance. I'm sure there's plenty of blame to go around – I've never forgiven myself, for instance – but that's best left unsaid.

"What was amazing was that we got it out the door at all. It was such a crazy mess, and such a crazy shame that our brilliant team didn't get to shine like they should have. Mucky was brilliant. Everyone there was a powerhouse at making games. Just maybe not so great at managing projects and people, or money or publishers."

"We were all satisfied. Not over the moon, but pretty pleased. But it quickly got swallowed up by *GTA*," says Keating. "We were a small team and we didn't have a massive budget. I don't think I'd call *Urban Chaos* trail blazing but it was definitely an evolutionary step. It didn't do any one thing amazing, but it did a lot of things at once – fighting, shooting, driving, an open-world. And games after it started doing that, a bit of everything."

Mucky Foot itself lasted longer than *Urban Chaos*'s reputation, but not by much. After shipping its debut, the company produced *Startopia*, a PC strategy game

IT WAS SUCH A CRAZY MESS, AND SUCH A CRAZY SHAME THAT OUR BRILLIANT TEAM DIDN'T GET TO SHINE

that did much better with critics but struggled to sell. After that came the perfectly reasonable, but ultimately uninspiring for both reviewers and consumers, licensed *Blade II* game. The final nail in Mucky Foot's coffin was *Bulletproof Monk*. Empire Interactive had financed a tie-in, which was expected to complement the success of the film, but when the movie failed to perform, it pulled the funding and cancelled the project. After a



> A GAMING EVOLUTION Urban Chaos > Grand Theft Auto 3 > Assassin's Creed



GTA 3 set the framework that dozens of open-world games to follow: *Just Cause, Assassin's Creed, RDD* and of course *GTA V*



With *AC*, Ubisoft took all the elements of open-world games and, using a swift navigation system, hooked them together



series of such unfortunate events, the studio inevitably shut down in November, 2003. Mucky Foot no choice but to close its doors.

"Everything at Mucky was a team effort," says Keating, who now runs a company dedicated to mobile development. "Everyone had a job but everyone was also working as a designer. We'd just chat and say, like, 'This is good' or 'This is shit.' It wasn't like at EA or something, where you have to have a meeting just to get anything through. It was all about getting the most out of what we had."

"I was a freelancer brought in to help finish *Urban Chaos* but was asked to stay on to help make *Blade*, another not quite brilliant game that ended up presenting similar, crazy challenges," says Meade, who today co-manages Fireproof, creator of mobile hit *The Room*. "I pretty much finished at Mucky shortly after. It was for the best though. After *Urban Chaos* and *Blade* many people at Mucky couldn't work together any more. They were insane projects made by only slightly more sane people, and it did us all in, I think. But it was a long time ago. We laugh about it now."

"It's a shame we went under," concludes Keating. "One of the things we were working on was that *Assassin's Creed* style animation system, something that would let you run across poles and traverse angles. But it just wasn't to be."



Third-person shooting, especially on consoles, was still a novelty in the late Nineties. But an over-the-shoulder camera was required to capture the scale of *Urban Chaos*'s environments.



Described even by its creators as something of a failed experiment, *Urban Chaos* was still one of the first 3D open-world games to include shooting, fighting, driving and exploration.

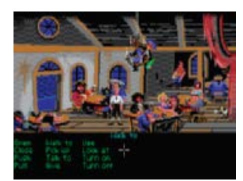


INTERVIEW

MAKING OF DAY OF THE TENTACLE

To celebrate the remastered release of arguably LucasArts' most iconic adventure game, **games™** speaks to co-lead designer Dave Grossman about its creation

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Secret Of Monkey Island (1990)
Writer/Programmer



Day Of The Tentacle (1993)
Lead designer



The Walking Dead (2012)
Director of Design/Writing



This was yours and Tim Schafer's first lead role. Do you feel it gave you a drive to create something unique and special?

Yes, but maybe not for the reasons you would think. I mean certainly it was exciting for us to be in the driver's seat but I think part of the success of that game was that we figured out early on not to overdirect people too much. So we had a core vision of what we wanted to do – which was the 'living inside an old Warner Bros cartoon' thing – and that was really good for giving people marching orders and keeping everything on track, but a big part of it was just getting a really good team together and then let them do what they do best to try and draw the best out of them. Anybody that was doing animation for something was usually given some basic framework of what was supposed to happen in a situation, and they could just dress it up however they wanted to and they generally made it way funnier than we initially imagined. So yeah, I think us being in charge was important, but I think, because we were new to it, we didn't have the kind of egos we do now.

Did you find this new role challenging?

We were somewhat prepared because we had been tailing Ron Gilbert for a couple of years and even today I still emulate his leadership style to some degree. He was very good at having the vision in his head and people would pitch ideas at him and he would either go 'That's great' or he was like 'Um, I don't think that fits' and then he would tell you why. And that was always super helpful for getting you onto the next idea, because you could realise that the tone was wrong or something is going on that is not fitting quite right in Ron's brain. That kind of nurturing, high communication style and always asking people questions about the thing they're working on is something that I've taken into my own style with my career. And also we had some knowledge and exposure to all the production parts, like how much different things cost and all the different pieces that go together. Because leading a project at LucasArts in those days was a combination of both creative leadership and also being responsible for a budget and a bunch of people – which is not a thing that happens all that often any more in this industry.

LEADING A PROJECT AT LUCASARTS WAS A COMBINATION OF CREATIVE LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY



THE TIME PUZZLES

"You had to think in an extra dimension than usual. It just made things a lot more complicated, but also it's a headstart in a different way because you have some idea already about what kinds of puzzles you're going to be making. All these things in a period of 200 years – so what happens over 200 years? Okay, well, wine turns into vinegar, for example. That was a low hanging fruit for doing puzzles."

What was the benefit of returning to *Maniac Mansion*?

The good part about it was that because it had been five years since the original one had come out the technology had changed, you could do a lot more with art and so forth, so part of our marching orders was 'Don't worry about matching the style of the original, just do something new but using that same kind of concept and world and characters'. So then we were able to go off and do the sort of Chuck Jones cartoon thing that we did do.

Did you have a particular design goal?

The idea was 'Okay, let's be funny but let's get the player into the headspace of a cartoon character'. And so we were always looking for opportunities to do that, to get them into a space where thinking like a regular human being would just get you into trouble and thinking like a cartoon character would bring you success.

How did you go about ensuring that players would approach the game in this way?

Well we had a huge playtest session for friends and family and had them come and play the game while it was in a sort of alpha plus-state. That was always a great process for figuring out where you had gone wrong with the design of some puzzle or the information's not coming across. The beauty of it was that you could just see them stuck on something and you could just ask them 'What are you thinking about right now?' and you could give them a hint and then you could think about how to implement that into the game so that you didn't have to come over and give them advice.

From these sessions, did you implement any changes into the gameplay?

Oh yeah, absolutely. Because especially in those old days at LucasArts, it was fairly easy to change stuff pretty late into the game. With *Day Of The Tentacle*, that was the first moment where we actually recorded voices for it, and that was the point where you kind of have to stop changing dialogue, once you do that. But that happened way at the end. A lot of games these days you do that early so you can animate to it, but there wasn't any actual lipsyncing or anything in this, so we did the voice recording pretty late. So that meant we could redesign stuff and there wasn't a lot of art money committed to it yet and we were more agile about that than a lot of things these days.



Day Of The Tentacle's unique art style drew you into the game almost immediately, and is the central reason it stood out so much.

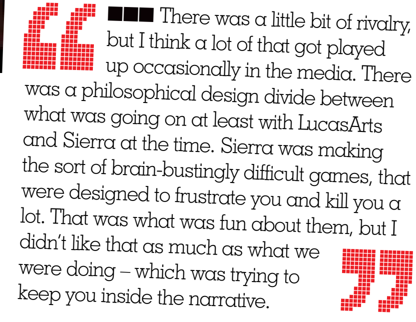
***Day Of The Tentacle* was the first LucasArts adventure to use voice acting. How did you approach this new area of game development?**

Yeah, I mean there's always a few things with voice acting. You might have ideas in your head about what the characters might sound like, and some of them are too close together and so you have to change your thinking about it because you want people to be able to easily distinguish the voices if they're onscreen together. That kind of thing. It was really hard to cast Bernard, I remember.

We went back and forth and we listened to lots and lots of takes from people and none of them felt right, and I think partly it was because he's kind of the centre of everything as the one holdover character from the original game and he's kind of the glue that holds the other two together just socially speaking. So I think he needed to be a little more grounded as a real person as the rest of them, and everything that we heard was a little bit too cartoony – which is an odd thing to say since we were trying to make a cartoon. So what we wanted was a real person who sounded a bit like a cartoon, and it was hard to articulate that. I don't think we knew exactly what it

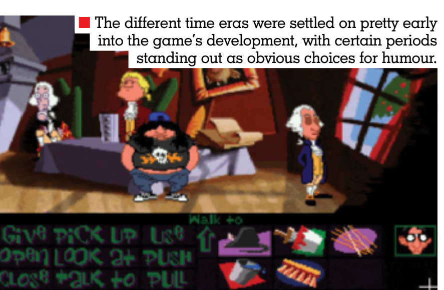
The remaster release of this game means that a new generation of gamers gets to experience it, which is fantastic.

RIVALRY WITH COMPETITORS…



"There was a little bit of rivalry, but I think a lot of that got played up occasionally in the media. There was a philosophical design divide between what was going on at least with LucasArts and Sierra at the time. Sierra was making the sort of brain-bustingly difficult games, that were designed to frustrate you and kill you a lot. That was what was fun about them, but I didn't like that as much as what we were doing – which was trying to keep you inside the narrative."





The different time eras were settled on pretty early into the game's development, with certain periods standing out as obvious choices for humour.





■ The move to CD-ROM meant that voice acting was a possibility, but there were still technical limitations for full-screen animations.

was that was wrong for quite a while – and finally one day an idea just dropped into my head 'You know, he should sound like Les Nessman from WKRP' and then someone said 'I know that guy's agent, maybe we can just get him?'. We were like 'That would be cool!' And lo and behold, it was!

THE IDEA OF THE GAME WAS TO GET THE PLAYER INTO THE HEADSPACE OF A CARTOON CHARACTER

How was it working alongside Tim when creating the humour for the game?

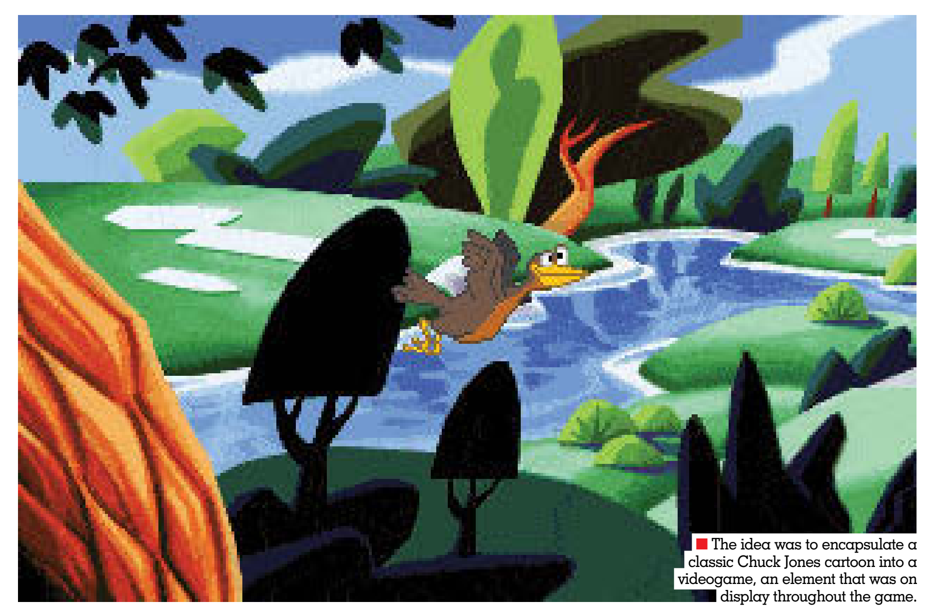
Yeah, we had a good dynamic, actually. We seemed to be on the same page about a lot of things, and if we weren't it was usually super clear, super fast which way we were going to go. We would just start talking about it and somebody would just clearly be more right, or care about it more than the other one. So it was pretty comfortable working dynamic. We didn't really get into fights about anything, which I have come to realise is a little bit unusual. It's hard to find good partners – I've had a few others over the years – but you need to hang onto them when you get them.

Did you find the creative process to be markedly different from other, perhaps more traditional games?

That's interesting because so much else changed just about the way you develop games in general between the time we were working on that game and the first time I worked on a drama, which is something I've done a lot less of. I think that with a comedy you can start a lot of stuff earlier, you need some basic good ideas and then when you're sort of filling in the space between them you can be pretty larky about it. I think you can trust yourself to make the art and do the music and do a lot of the production work without understanding some of the details of what's going to fit in the middle. And I think that's less true for a drama, you want to kind of have a clear, more detailed, more cohesive plan before you start putting any real money into it. And again I think that boils down to that thing of if a small piece goes wrong, the whole thing can come tumbling down like a house of cards, and I think that's less true for comedy.

Did you find the game changed much during the development from what you had originally designed or planned?

Not in a significant way, no. It just kept getting better and better every time we saw some detail somebody was putting on the screen. It got closer to what we wanted, you know? The trickiest challenges were about technical limitations of what we could do on screen. Because we were after this animation style with lots of squashing and stretching and characters being really large on screen, but this was early in the days of VGA and the heavily pixelated characters – 320x200, I think the game might've been – anyways, the small number of pixels on screen and the limited 256 colour palette and so we had to pull some technical tricks behind the scenes to get some of the stuff to work at all. An actual full screen animation just was not possible by conventional means, you just couldn't move the pixels around.



■ The idea was to encapsulate a classic Chuck Jones cartoon into a videogame, an element that was on display throughout the game.

Did you feel at the time that you were creating something special?

Well you can't really predict what the public is going to think about anything. I think we were conscious that we were making something good, I think, it made us laugh anyway. And that's mostly all you've got at the end of the day, your own opinion and the opinions of anyone you show it to, you know, 'is this good?'. But you can't predict if 25 years later people will still be talking about it, that almost seems random. You can hope for that, but you can't tell that it's going to happen in advance.

GAME CHANGERS

VIEWTIFUL JOE

Released: 26 June 2003 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house **System:** GameCube



Viewtiful Joe was an original IP from Hideki Kamiya, responsible for overseeing the likes of *Resident Evil 2*, *Devil May Cry*, *Bayonetta* and the upcoming Xbox One exclusive *Scalebound*

A forgotten Capcom gem, this was the GameCube game that redefined action in the most stylish way imaginable

THERE ISN'T ANOTHER action game on the planet that evokes the same sentiment of stylish, unbridled joy as the original *Viewtiful Joe*. Even now, 13 years on from its original release, it's still a masterclass in fluid action; Hideki Kamiya's fast and furious love letter to cinema and a dying breed of game design. If you take yourself back to 2003, you'll find Nintendo in a familiar situation: struggling to sell hardware and prove to perspective third-party studios that its latest console – the GameCube – was worthy of supporting. Capcom responded in force, pushing five console exclusives into the pipeline as a way of testing the GameCube's capacity to appeal to adults. The fact that the console looked like a big purple lunchbox certainly didn't help their case, but a team of legendary developers working on exciting new projects could surely turn the tide, right?

The Capcom Five, as they came to be known by an enthusiastic audience, were: *P.N.03*, *Dead Phoenix* (which failed to rise from the ashes), *Resident Evil 4*, *Killer 7* and, of course, *Viewtiful Joe*. It was a killer line-up, unprecedented almost. And while *Resident Evil 4* tends to receive most of the attention from this era of unbridled creativity, it was Hideki Kamiya's debut design project that still sends a shot of adrenaline to our hearts. Kamiya, fresh from directing *Resident Evil 2* and *Devil May Cry*, was tasked by the late Satoru Iwata to develop a game from the ground up, and the result is a classic that *should* need no introduction.

And yet, sadly, it does. It should be telling of the sort of developer Kamiya is that he chose to make his debut title on next-generation hardware a 2D action game. It's a move that's indicative of his brash and subversive development style; a master of the 3D genre stepping back to perfect the side-scroller and give the fixed-camera style he so lovingly propagated with *Resident Evil 2* and *Devil May Cry* one last hurrah.

BEST BOSS

VIEWTIFUL JOE HAD SOME GREAT BOSS BATTLES, THESE ARE OUR FAVOURITES



THE IRON OGRE

★ There's a lot of cool content in *Viewtiful Joe*, though it may be the appearance of Hulk Davidson that really sells it. He is, after all, a giant dinosaur riding a hog and wielding a battle-axe. It's not the most challenging fight in the game, but it may just be one of the most entertaining.



THE BLADE MASTER

★ This one can grind down your patience pretty quickly if you aren't careful, but there's actually an interesting piece of trivia attached to Alastor - his appearance and attack patterns are actually inspired by *the* Alastor, one of Dante's Devil Arms from the original *Devil May Cry.*



THE INFERNO LORD

★ Fire Leo is a gigantic pain in the ass. His headline battle, a three-phase stretch through button mash hell, has a tendency to test even the most creative of players – though excessive use of your VFX powers usually gets the job done.

The viewpoint was, well, all about the view; putting the player in the position of observer as much as it did an active participant. Kamiya created a world that's viewed through a camera lens – it doesn't follow Joe as he flips and skips through the air, but contorts in an effort to mimic the audience's head movements. The world shifts around Joe. It's almost as if he's zooming through an elegantly built set, our movement of the thumbsticks instructing some invisible studio-technicians behind the scenes to move the stage along.

■■■ *Viewtiful Joe* is, after all, set in make-believe Movieland. Sure, the story set-up is insubstantial at best – with Joe's girlfriend, Sylvia, being dragged into the reel of an action movie by an on-screen monster, with our hero pulled in right after – but, just as it is with many great action flicks, it isn't something to dwell on. Because with one shout of an ancient, mystical phrase, Joe unlocks his latent powers and is transformed from shlub to cinematic demi-god: "Henshin a-go-go, BABY!"

This isn't a game that simply succeeds from being stylish, it succeeds because the style is the game.

THE WORLD SHIFTS AROUND JOE. IT'S ALMOST AS IF HE IS ZOOMING THROUGH AN ELEGANTLY BUILT SET

KEY FACTS

■ *Viewtiful Joe* was later brought over to PlayStation 2 after Capcom was disappointed with its sales. It was rebranded with a familiar subtitle – *Viewtiful Joe: A New Hope* – though it was, in truth, a mediocre port from Clover Studios.

■ The game features a ton of winks and nods to other Nintendo and Capcom game franchises. Characters inspired by weapons from *Devil May Cry*, weird-cameo appearances from R.O.B the robot and Joe even has a tendency to hum the *Super Mario* theme music.

Dropping into slow motion lets Joe deal out double damage, dodge bullets, and send enemies clattering against one another all over the screen. Zoom drags the camera in close to the ever-vein hero, letting him strike a pose before unleashing an array of ultra-stunning moves on unsuspecting aggressors. And then there's Mach Speed; the ability that lets Joe punch so fast he literally bursts into flames. *Viewtiful Joe* is one of the most fiercely evocative action games ever.

Not only did pulling off these moves make you feel truly, wonderfully powerful, but it also gave way to a subtle combo system that we've still yet to see properly replicated. Multipliers are triggered by knocking enemies into one another; fights quickly escalate by building a hit combo through basic strikes before sending that enemy careering into three or four behind them. The more enemies you can knock into one another, the longer you can keep the sequence of sublime fluidity in motion, the bigger the V-Point reward. Kamiya built a simple combat system that's designed entirely around encouraging creative free-flowing play; the fake audience clapping as you finish a combo with a devastating Red-Hot One-Hundred introducing a self-congratulatory smile on the player's face.

Viewtiful Joe demonstrated Kamiya's love for cinema, but also his understanding of cinematic techniques. Just two years later, *Resident Evil 4* would release and effectively kill the fixed-camera angle for action games, a tight third-person POV becoming the preference for game designers. But then there's always *Viewtiful Joe*, the game that proved that the fixed-camera could continue to exist and thrive, no matter the genre – it's just down to the team behind the lens to ensure that it is used correctly.



GAME CHANGERS

SIX GAMES THE CAPCOM FIVE INSPIRED

IT STARTED AS A PUBLISHING DEAL FOR GAMECUBE, BUT IT LAUNCHED THE CAREERS OF SEVERAL GAMING LEGENDS

THE ORIGINAL 'CAPCOM Five' was a launch collection of the most exciting games of the GameCube era, even if one of them didn't actually make it to the system. *Resident Evil 4*, *P.N.03*, *Killer 7*, *Viewtiful Joe*, and the cancelled *Dead Phoenix* represented a commitment from Capcom to back Nintendo's console in a big way.

Many of these games would prove to be hugely influential, with *Viewtiful Joe* pushing combo-driven combat, *Resi 4* revolutionising horror and third-person shooters, and *Killer 7* opening up the door to grown-up, surrealist experiences (*Deadly Premonition* feels like it has some roots here). But perhaps just as important were the games that the producers and directors behind the Capcom Five would go on to make.

Shinji Mikami, Hideki Kamiya, Atsushi Inaba, Hiroyuki Kobayashi and Goichi Suda (or Suda 51 as he is also known) would all go on to make some incredible games. It's testament to how prolific and impactful these creators were and would go on to be that this list would eventually include *Shadows Of The Damned*, *Project X Zone*, *Dragon's Dogma*, *MadWorld*, *Anarchy Reigns*, *Bayonetta*, and *Lollipop Chainsaw*. However, it's only the games that have clear parallels to the original five that we've profiled here.

When you consider the pool of talent that Capcom had gathered at the time, it's a wonder that the GameCube and these titles didn't prove to be more commercially successful. As it was, Capcom wasn't able to keep hold of most of these creators; they went on to form Clover and, after that collapsed, Platinum Games. As the years have gone by, some of their output has begun to lag behind modern gaming trends, but when they embrace their roots, as these games did, they often produce something both incredibly innovative and nostalgic.

Whenever we hear that one of the directors or producers of the Capcom Five has a new project on the horizon, our interest is immediately piqued. With games like these in their histories we always feel confident they can hit upon something again that will capture some of that original magic.



OKAMI

■ Team Viewtiful and many of Capcom Studio 9's R&D talent was transformed into Clover Studios. The studio's goal (with Kamiya at the helm) was to create new IP and they key success story was *Okami*. The 2006 action-adventure game used a beautiful woodcut, watercolour style and is largely recognised as an unsung classic of the PlayStation 2 era.



VIEWTIFUL JOE 2

■ With Kamiya off working on *Okami*, *Viewtiful Joe 2* was put into development with Masaaju Yamada and Atsushi Inaba taking on directorial and production roles respectively, with the latter helping to bring the likes of *Viewtiful Joe*, *Okami* and *God Hand* into the world. A critical darling that once again failed to capture the general public.



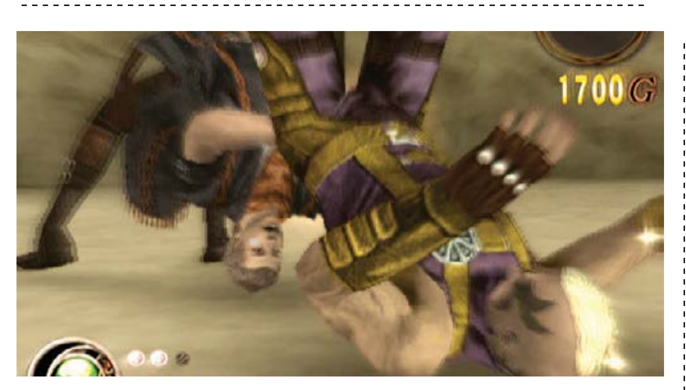
VANQUISH

■ Shinji Mikami may not have found success with *P.N.03*, but the developer took many of the basic design philosophies and pushed them into his Platinum Games' debut, *Vanquish*. The wickedly fast, super stylish shooter was a fantastic take on the genre, with its boost-slide mechanic widely regarded as excellently creative.



NO MORE HEROES

■ Suda 51 is known for being rather 'out there' – and that's if we're being generous – on his projects, but it's still bizarre to even consider that this bloody, grindhouse-inspired, Adult-rated action game was a Nintendo Wii exclusive, the console that typically appealed to the younger generation and families.



GOD HAND

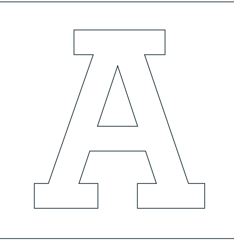
■ Showing a commitment to hardcore gamers in the later stages of the PS2's life, as *Guitar Hero* and *Singstar* took over the platform, Mikami's *God Hand* was one of the most brutal and challenging brawlers you could wish to play. It didn't get the best review scores, but those who tapped into its wavelength found it hard to put down.

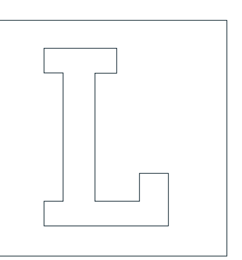
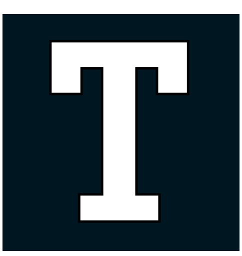


THE EVIL WITHIN

■ Tapping back into his *Resi 4* roots, Shinji Mikami went all-out with his first Tango Gameworks release working with Bethesda. It somehow manages to be even more insane than Capcom's series, more twisted, creepier, but also a little dated in its handling. It honours the past perhaps a little more than it pushes things forward for the genre.

THE



CHILLBLAST FUSION TRISTAR GAMING PC

MANUFACTURER: **CHILLBLAST** PRICE: **£1999.99**

WE WOULD FORGIVE you for thinking that given the Tristar's imposing and unique frame you might be paying mostly for the design of this prebuilt gaming PC from Chillblast, but after our tests with the hardware, that would be an incorrect assumption. This immensely powerful rig compares very favourably with the much more conservative models this team has to offer.

The design *is* rather exceptional, though, and if you like your PC setup to make a statement as well as run top of the line games then this is far and away the most intimidating piece of kit Chillblast has to offer. The Chillblast Fusion Wolf offers similar specs and internals for about £400 less, but compared to its sedate black casing, the Tristar feels exceptionally more impressive.

So, a good chunk of the price is going on the looks, sure, but what you have inside is a high-end PC running a NVIDIA GeForce GTX 980Ti 6GB graphics card. While the whole machine appears quite bulky it runs quietly and surprisingly cool thanks in part to its Corsair Hydro H80i GT CPU Cooler and the unique design. With the CPU and motherboard in one pod, the video card in another and the PSU in the last, each of the heat-generating components are kept apart and allowed their own circulation of air.

When it comes to running games, we were deeply impressed. *Adr1ft* and *Quantum Break* were our titles of choice and both ran at exceptionally high frame-rates with hardly any fluctuation, just as you would expect. The Tristar asks a lot, but delivers plenty.


VERDICT 9/10



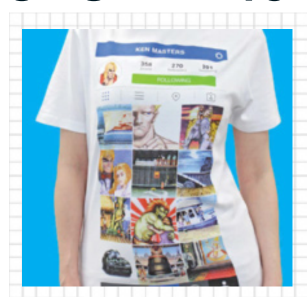

By having each compartment house a different heat-generating part of the PC, cooling is more effective.


As with all Chillblast machines, everything is incredibly neat and tightly packed.



This is a high-end machine and the price reflects that, but, given the parts, it's not unreasonable.

GAMING CLOTHING



STREET FIGHTER KENSTAGRAM T-SHIRT

This is certainly one of the stranger *Street Fighter* shirts we've ever seen, but if there was one character likely to have an Instagram feed it would be Ken. And he's managed to capture some pretty amazing moments.
www.yellowbulldog.com



DARK SOULS III FIRE SHIRT

Being a *Dark Souls* player is a badge of honour. Whether you're a fan or not, you understand the lengths that it takes to achieve anything in this series. As such, fans should wear their allegiance with pride.
www.yellowbulldog.com



THE DIVISION TOXIC CITY T-SHIRT

The classic New York cityscape has rarely looked as ominous as its does in *The Division* and this artwork captures that feeling rather nicely. A must for those still rummaging in the Dark Zone.
www.yellowbulldog.com

ASTRO A40 TR HEADSET + MIXAMP PRO TR



SOLD BY: **ASTRO GAMING** PRICE: **£200**

WITH THE PERFECT mix of comfort and high-end design, Astro's top level headsets continue to impress, and the additional level control offered by the Mixamp on this set of A40's takes things up a notch. You will look a *little* like an anime character when you wear them, but we're cool with that. It's a shame that it's wired for the price being asked, but that does allow it easy compatibility for Xbox One gamers. For sound quality and build you couldn't ask for too much more.
www.astrogaming.co.uk

STEELSERIES SIBERIA 200 HEADSET

SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **€79.99**

ONE OF THE things we love about the SteelSeries suspension design is that it typically offers unparalleled comfort with robust design, but keeps the weight down. This headset is ever so slightly on the budget end of this series of headsets and it shows a little in some reduced comfort and slightly firmer ear cushioning. The sound also lacks a little bass, but as an all-round pair of headphones for gaming and listening to music, this is a great choice.
www.steelseries.com





STEELSERIES SIBERIA 350 HEADSET

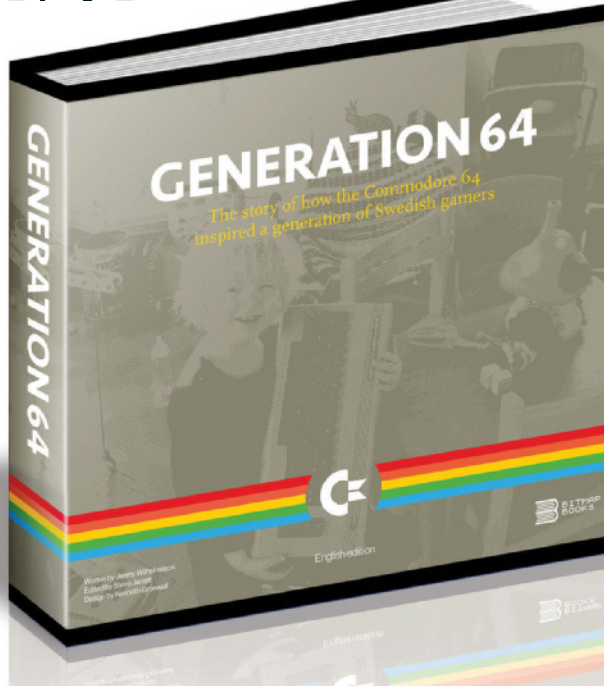
SOLD BY: **STEELSERIES** PRICE: **€129.99**

IF IT'S A battle between the two SteelSeries headsets we're featuring here then the Siberia 350 would be our choice, so long as you're looking for a PC headset, of course. Thanks to its USB connection it is rather narrow in its usage, but the additional comfort that comes from the memory foam ear cups should not be underestimated. The Siberia 350 is an all-around more accomplished set of headphones and well worth the price for dedicated desktop gamers.
www.steelseries.com



GENERATION 64

PUBLISHER: **BITMAP BOOKS**



WHILE WE LOVE to reflect on the influence of classic consoles we wouldn't necessarily have thought that reading about the way that the Commodore 64 impacted the lives of several Swedish gamers would be the most riveting read ever. Once again, we were proved wrong by this collection. The C64 was an immensely important machine in the lives of a number of people and the profiles in this book help to sell that pretty well.

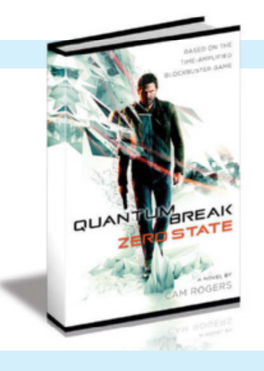
For instance you can read about how learning to code and game on the Commodore 64 set Fredrik Liljegren on the path to becoming a developer with DICE, working on *Battlefield* and *Star Wars: Battlefront*. You can read about how the head of King, creator of *Candy Crush Saga* started out with a Commodore 64 and even managed to play a part in the design of the PlayStation 4.

There are so many stories like this in the book that the narrow focus on this one home computer in one country is actually a great benefit, helping to personalise the stories being shared and give them real focus. Every profile is accompanied by images of the key games that were enjoyed as well as family photographs of these now grown-up and successful creatives, coders and builders when they were young, impressionable and ready to learn.

Generation 64 is a beautifully constructed book, cased lovingly in a hard box and printed on top-quality paper. Its focus is narrow, but its lessons universal and very relatable. Lovers of the system and those looking for some professional inspiration should look no further.

www.generation64.com

VERDICT 9/10



QUANTUM BREAK: ZERO STATE

As the official novelisation of *Quantum Break* from Remedy Entertainment, it's good to know that Cam Rogers, its author, was also an employee of the studio and helped in the writing of the game. As such you can expect a very faithful adaptation of Remedy's vision even if it sticks to one defined timeline.

www.titanbooks.com



HALO: NEW BLOOD

This is the first *Halo* novel from former *Blood Bowl* and *Guild Wars* novelist Matt Forbeck, but this tale follows a familiar name from the *Halo* series, former ODST Gunnery Sergeant Edward Buck (played by Nathan Fillion in the games). This tells the story of how he became one of the new generation of Spartans.

www.titanbooks.com



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: CHRONICLE VOLUME 1

It's best to think of this as something akin to the old testament according to Warcraft as this first volume in a multipart series explores the creation of Azeroth and how this world came to be. It's packed with new art and background on all sorts of famous locations and people.

www.darkhorse.com



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After this fight, the games™ name shall be honoured by all people on 16 June



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: LEGION HANDS-ON VERDICT

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